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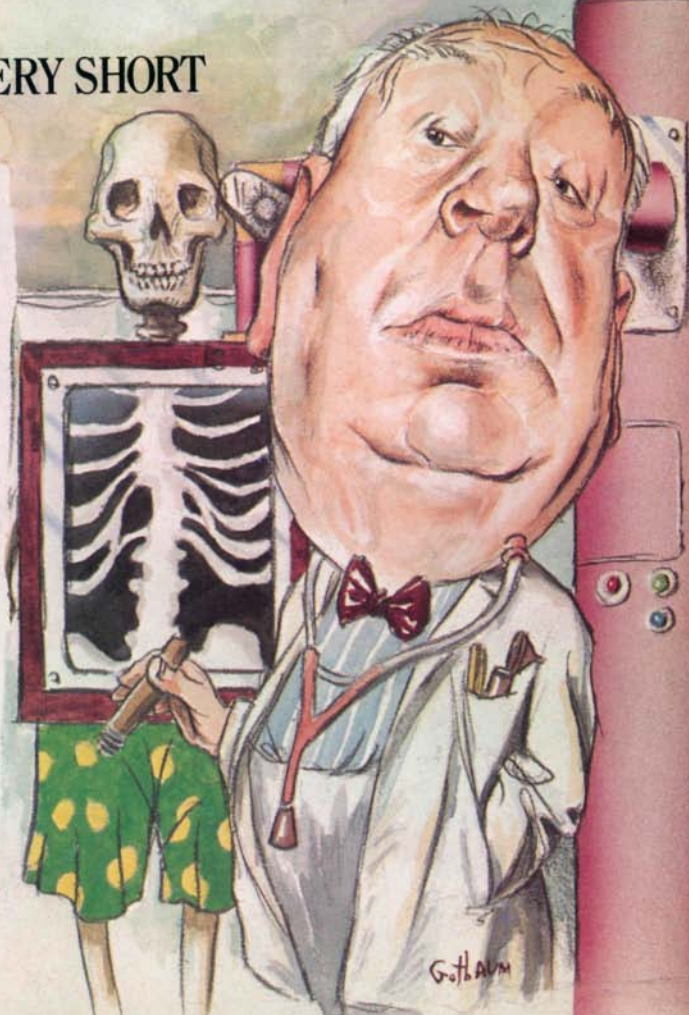
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MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NEW MYSTERY SHORT  
STORIES BY

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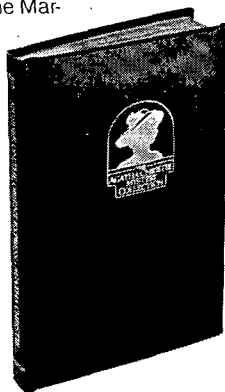
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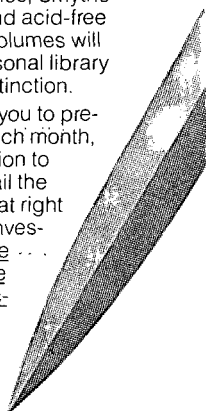
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# GUEST EDITORIAL

by Chris Steinbrunner

Many readers will remember Chris Steinbrunner's previous column in AHMM—as Peter Christian, author of *Frames of Reference*. Chris has been traveling to Italy lately to look in on the international mystery movie scene, and it seemed to us that his discoveries there would be of interest to all crime-fiction buffs. On top of that, it's nice to have him back!—ED.

A film festival devoted exclusively to mystery films? Perhaps in America such an event might be regarded (and even handled) frivolously, but in Italy for the past six years Mystfest has been dealing with the international mystery cinema very, very seriously.

Mystfest is held in Cattolica, a small resort town on the sunny Adriatic coast, every June. Last year, the festival included a retrospective of Agatha Christie films, and Christie herself was "tried"—for relevance to today's audiences—in the town's ancient courthouse. (Christianna Brand and Christie's grandson testified for the defense. The author was exonerated.) Spectators included townspeople and visitors, as well as festival guests, in friendly mix—listening to instant multi-lingual translations on headsets. The festival's films were also, in most cases, both subtitled and simultaneously translated on headsets.

Mystfest was organized six years ago by aggressive Rome journalist and mystery activist

Felice Laudadio, who now happily feels the genre—and the festival—is coming into its own. "At the risk of making premature predictions about the return of the chiller, I would say we are now enjoying the revival of a much-loved film genre which had been abandoned, at least by respected filmmakers. This year the mystery film is once again fascinating screenwriters and directors, distributors and producers. People have need of stories of intrigue which are well-told, well-acted and well-made."

The festival's 1985 selections tried for that goal, and certainly presented varied fare from Europe, America, and Australia. The American entries themselves were a decidedly mixed bag. *Blackout*, a film made for HBO starring Richard Widmark—he plays a relentless cop who spends years tracking down a man who disappeared after murdering his wife and children—was actually filmed in Canada. *The Holcroft Covenant*, directed by John Frankenheimer from the international thriller by Robert



Ludlum, was officially a British entry. *Mixed Blood*, about drugs and violently clashing teen gangs in New York's lower East Side filmed by Paul Morrissey, was a French entry. *Radioactive Dreams* had two youngsters named Phillip and Marlowe step out of a West Coast bomb shelter fifteen years after a nuclear holocaust. The last event in Mystfest's nearly round-the-clock daily screenings was the "Fear at Midnight" section (not part of the competition), generally terror movies. In this category, *Nightmare on Elm Street* was by far the best received. Its director, Wes Craven, was one of the festival judges.

The contributions from Europe were complex and absorbing. In the English *Parker*, a young executive is kidnapped by terrorists but released unharmed after eleven days with no explanation. Soon friends around him begin getting murdered. Lino Ventura in France's *The Seventh Target* is a busi-

nessman baffled by a series of senseless attacks. *Kaminsky* is high drama in a small German police station. *The Man from Majorca* is a realistic police procedural from Sweden. There were retrospectives on the works of John le Carré and Claude Chabrol.

Two films really stood out. *De Prooi (The Prey)*, a first film by a Dutch woman director, tells of a teenager who is horrified to learn that her mother has been killed—possibly deliberately—by a hit-and-run car and, further, the victim was not really her mother, as the autopsy reveals the woman had never borne children. *Orion's Belt*, a knuckle-biting thriller from Norway that won the festival's first prize, is set in the remote islands of the Arctic Circle. Three adventurous Norwegian fishermen engaged in a bit of harmless smuggling accidentally sail into a secret Soviet "listening post" and find

(continued on page 58)

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FICTION

# A Bag of Grief

by Stephen Wasylyk



Illustration by Jeff Potter

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**T**he dawn fog hung thick and heavy, coating everything in the gray world with a film of moisture, the beadlets that had condensed on the tree-lined, two lane macadam road as treacherous as ice in winter.

The rear wheels threatened to slide out from under Kendall several times, forcing him to play a tattoo on the brake as he drifted slowly through the curves and dips and rises. He was in no hurry. Doors opened and doors closed in every man's life, and he was on his way to close one in his.

Even creeping along, he almost missed the road to the small private airfield. It went up a small hill, curved, and came out along the edge of the field, invisible now in the fog.

With no trees close, the mist wrapped him in cotton wool, robbing him of all perspective and forcing him to poke his head out of the window and follow the edge of the ragged macadam to stay on the road.

A feminine voice on his radio summed up headline news. Kendall had heard the lead story earlier. A man named Ryder had escaped from the county prison at two that morning, was armed, considered dangerous, and believed to be still in the vicinity.

Anyone who flew off the field knew the prison. The gray walls formed a pentagon less than ten miles across a shallow, wooded valley, and depending on the wind direction, you flew over it either taking off or landing.

Knowing that Ryder was out there in the fog didn't disturb Kendall.

If the man had been smart enough to break out, he was too smart to come this way. The road alongside the field dead-ended at both ends on major roadways that were easily blocked, while on the other side of the prison high-speed highways gave him a chance to put miles behind him quickly. That sounded like the way to go for a man who still had the fifty thousand he had lifted in the bank holdup that had sent him to prison.

Kendall spotted the dark shape of the wooden sign planted at the driveway to the office building and turned in to pull alongside two cars already nosed up to the entrance, a surprise this early on a foggy morning.

Double doors opened into a lounge, deserted except for a middle-aged woman in slacks and a jacket stretched out on a sofa, a small blue athletic bag on the floor beside her.

As he passed, Kendall took with him the impression of brassy

hair in need of attention and a face etched with the sad acceptance that life would never be different for her from the way it was now.

The man in the office was white-haired and deeply tanned, dozing with his feet on the desk and his hands clasped in his lap. Behind him the fog had condensed on a large window, the beadlets distorting an indefinite dark shape that Kendall knew was a helicopter parked on a pad next to the building, while a radio on the windowsill skipped from one aircraft frequency to another.

One eye flicked open enough to see who had entered.

"Morning, Kendall. What brings you here so early?"

"You'd better sit there with both eyes open, Marco. You may not know it, but one of the guests at the prison made it out last night and is roaming around. He could have walked in on you."

"What would he want here?"

"One of those cars out front and your wallet. Who is the woman?"

"A Mrs. Gill. Expected a friend to fly in last night, but the weather prevented it. I suppose she'll get another call any minute telling her that he can't make it this morning, as though she wouldn't have already worked that out for herself." Marco swung his feet to the floor. "I hear you're selling the Mustang."

"The judge who set the alimony payments must have figured I could do without it."

"Listen. I'd be willing to carry you for a time. No rent, an occasional tank of gas. I know how much you hate to let it go. Not that I'm being Mr. Goodheart. I like to fly it as much as you do."

Kendall shook his head. "I'd only get in deeper. Besides, Curtis agreed to let me take it up once in a while. For a reduction in price, of course."

"He would," said Marco dryly. "But knowing him, he'll fly it somewhere else within a week and we'll never see it again."

"When I sign the papers, I'll suggest politely that he not do that." Kendall headed for the door to the flight line. "I came to get the certificates and the log. I'm supposed to meet him for breakfast in an hour and sign it over."

"Kendall, take my advice. Top off the tanks as soon as the fog lifts, get in the damn thing and head west until you run dry, set it down and don't come back. Between what the recession did to your business and what your ex-wife did to you, you've had a year that I've seen put men in the hands of the mind mechanics."

"I had the Mustang to fly," said Kendall.

Marco grinned. "Best therapy in the world."

The grass was wet, the sod spongy, the silence as heavy as the fog. As he walked along, the dim shapes of the tied-down private planes appeared and disappeared eerily, like the opening scene in a film about flying as the director tries to build suspense, but that is make-believe and this was reality so there was no suspense, only the ending to what had begun more than a year ago.

He'd miss Marco.

Many owners who used the field didn't like him because he was polite and cool and not very friendly. But then many of them didn't understand why Kendall kept the fighter, which burned more gasoline in take-off than some used on a cross country flight.

Marco did, and that was the bond between them.

Marco had mentioned once that he had learned to fly at fourteen and had been in aviation in one way or another since. Rumors said he had flown in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, and uncounted smaller wars all over the world in between. It was possible. Kendall knew he had spent time in Central and South America and Africa, but Marco had never said what he'd been doing there.

Kendall did know that in spite of the white hair Marco could fly every plane on the field better than the man who owned it, and that included his.

The Mustang was parked in the one hangar on the field. He'd had the nose checkered in bright red and yellow, the checkering repeated on the rudder, the polished aluminum gleaming in between. Looking at it always gave Kendall pleasure. In its own way, losing the fighter meant as much to him as losing his wife. Flying had always been important to him, the kind of flying you could do in a fighter, a freedom that could never be explained to those who had never experienced it and didn't have to be to those who had, like Marco. It wasn't likely he'd ever own another. The passing years were making flyable World War II aircraft rarer and more expensive.

He climbed up on the wing, pulled the folder out of the cockpit, slid the canopy closed, and stepped to the ground to walk slowly around the plane one last time. He'd flown quite a few combat aircraft and seen a great many more before he left the service to go into business. The jets were faster, but few had the Mustang's lean, graceful deadliness, a rare combination of form and function like a shark. Kendall grinned. A lousy simile. A shark had evolved through millions of years, the Mustang in ninety days, and the shark would give no one any pleasure except himself.



The hangar faded into the mist as he walked away, the fog wiping out a chapter in his life the way the divorce court had wiped out another.

He started around the office building, shrugged and changed direction. Without the Mustang, he wouldn't be returning soon, and the least he could do was say goodbye to Marco.

He reached for the brass door handle and paused, staring down at several wet footprints on the square of concrete before the door.

Someone had entered the building within the last few minutes. Not the woman. The prints were too large. Not Marco. The feet on the desk had been shod in rubber soled shoes that would have left clear and sharply defined prints. These were wet and splotchy, left by leather soles like his.

Through the door window, he could see part of the sofa in the lounge, now empty.

He didn't hesitate. Staying close to the wall, he edged around the building away from Marco's office to his car, unlocked the glove box, and pulled out the .38 that had been there ever since he and Marco had visited a shooting range a week ago. He returned the same way, eased the door open, and stepped into the small corridor.

A man's voice, harsh and menacing, echoed from Marco's office.

"I'm telling you we get in that helicopter and we go *now*!"

Marco's voice was unconcerned. "We wait another hour. The sun is coming up. As soon as it burns the fog off enough to see ten feet in front of us, we'll go."

Kendall edged closer to the office door.

"You think I'm stupid? You guys fly in all kinds of weather now. I can hear them on that radio of yours."

"You're listening to planes a hundred miles away, Ryder."

"You've got to get me out of here!"

"Don't get excited. What good will it do if we crack up?"

Kendall peered around the edge of the doorway.

A wide-shouldered man with close-cropped hair, dressed in a dull gray shirt and slacks soaked to the knee, was standing alongside Marco's desk, a small automatic half extended.

He'd been wrong about Ryder's coming this way because he hadn't considered the one way Ryder could get out—fly out. But he was right about Ryder's being smart. By flying out, he'd be a hundred miles away while the police still blocked the roads and combed the countryside on the other side of the prison.

Kendall pushed one arm around the door casing, leveled the .38,

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and quietly said, "Freeze and raise them high."

The man wanted to take him on so badly that Kendall could feel the vibrations, but Ryder knew better when all he could see was a gun, an arm, and part of a face:

His hands went up, the right still holding the automatic.

"Put the gun on the desk and step away from it," Kendall said.

Ryder obeyed and took a step back reluctantly.

"Face against the wall."

Again the reluctance, as though he was considering how big a gamble it might be to test his luck.

Kendall eased around the doorway.

With a scream, the woman charged from the side with feline fury the moment he stepped into the office, her arms windmilling, her fingers clawed and tearing at him. He threw up his left arm to protect himself, her weight staggering him, unable to bring himself to swing the .38 around to stop her, and then it was gone, smashed from his hand by Ryder.

Everyone was yelling except Kendall, Marco's voice the loudest.

*"Don't shoot him Ryder!"*

Kendall looked into Ryder's face and saw that he owed his life to the strength of Marco's lungs because the look in those eyes said he was already dead. Ryder simply hadn't decided to pull the trigger of the automatic he'd snatched off the desk.

"Let him alone," said Marco, "We need him."

"I don't need him."

"Do you want to fly out before the cops grab you or not? If I fly alone, we wait until the fog lifts. With him to help me, we go now."

"He's a pilot?"

"And a good one."

"I'll think about it."

Kendall stood very still. Marco didn't need him at all. By telling Ryder he did, he was trying to save him from a bullet, and for the moment Ryder was willing to go along, possibly because shooting Kendall might make Marco stubborn enough not to leave the office. Ryder could afford to wait until the helicopter was ready to go, wait until Marco had little choice. All Marco had done was buy Kendall a few more minutes.

Ryder motioned to the woman. "You did good, Stella. Bring his gun along."

"I don't want a gun," she said. "I don't like guns."

"Get it!" he snapped.

She picked it up by the butt with a thumb and forefinger and placed it on the desk, suddenly defiant.

"You promised no more guns after this. You have one. That's all you need. If you're lying to me again, I don't go."

She stood holding the bag to her chest with both arms.

Kendall could see Ryder soften.

"All right." He motioned to Marco. "Let's go. I mean it. No more talk, no more excuses."

Marco raised his hands. "You're the man with the gun."

He came around the desk, one eyelid flicking as he passed Kendall. Kendall followed him out, the woman third, Ryder bringing up the rear.

The fog had begun to thin, not enough yet to meet flying minimums, still cool and wet on Kendall's face. As a pilot he didn't like fog, but lived with it knowing that, under the right circumstances, he could die in it, but not this way—not by a bullet.

His lips twisted. Parading out to the helicopter, they could have been headed for one of Marco's weekend sightseeing flights.

At the edge of the landing pad, Marco turned to Ryder.

"Wait here. We'll untie it and get it ready."

Entering a world about which he knew nothing, Ryder could do only what he was told, but he positioned himself near the tail rotor so he could watch both sides of the helicopter and was close enough to shoot.

Kendall took one side and unfastened the tie-downs. When he glanced up, Marco had opened the pilot's door. Kendall opened the other.

Marco smiled at him across the seats.

"You should have stayed out of this, Kendall," he said softly.

"I can handle a guy like Ryder."

Kendall shrugged. "I always thought a man looking into a gun muzzle needed a little help."

"The right kind of help. Why in the hell didn't you shoot the woman?"

"Killing women isn't my style."

"That's what I mean. There are no styles when it comes to staying alive. You almost ended up dead. Remember that the next time."

Marco was putting on a show for Ryder, pushing controls around, stepping back to look over the aircraft.

"There won't be a next time," said Kendall. "You know damned well he's not taking me along so that he has to watch both of us."

Marco smiled. "I told you I could handle a guy like Ryder. There's a .45 under the seat. Walk away, look up at the tip of one of the rotor blades and yell something about its being damaged. He'll look at you. That's all the edge I need."

"Forget it. No sense in both of us getting killed. I'll ease out and take my chances in the fog. You fly him to where he wants to go."

Marco's eyes were colder than Kendall had ever seen them. "I'm not flying this bum anywhere. Do what I tell you. If I miss, run like hell. Now go."

Kendall knew Marco would try with the .45 whether he diverted Ryder's attention or not. He strolled away, his eyes raised to follow one of the rotor blades. When he glanced at Ryder, he had taken a step to the side, his face blank, the automatic leveled, and Kendall felt the perspiration build on his forehead. Ryder didn't intend to let him return to the chopper.

He put his hands on his hips, eyes on the rotor tip, and yelled, "Marco! We have a problem!"

Ryder's eyes were on him.

Through the open doors, he saw Marco step away from the chopper and crouch, the .45 held in both hands.

The woman screamed a warning.

Ryder spun and fired, the report flat against the heavy boom of the .45.

Marco stumbled sideways, bumping against the helicopter heavily as Ryder, arm and automatic extended, stalked toward him to finish him off, Kendall's killing put on hold because one pilot was as good as another and it was Marco he could do without now.

*If I miss, run like hell, Marco had said.*

Kendall ran, but not into the fog. He sprinted toward Ryder.

Ryder saw him coming and hesitated. If he shot Kendall, then he had no pilot at all, and in that hesitation, the .45 boomed again.

Ryder's feet left the concrete as he pitched backward.

Kendall ducked under the tail boom in time to see the woman disappear into the fog alongside the building and in time to see Marco slip to a sitting position against a landing gear strut, his shirt stained red.

Kendall knelt beside him.

"Getting old," said Marco. "That's the first time I missed a shot like that since the Truman administration."

His eyes lifted to Kendall's. "You were supposed to run away from Ryder, not toward him, dummy."



"Thought I'd give you a second chance," said Kendall.

"Waste of time. He really didn't need another shot to finish me off."

"I'll get an ambulance here fast."

"In this fog? Forget it. Even on a clear day, it's a half hour out and a half hour back. I don't have that much blood."

The sun was higher now. The fog had thinned a little more. Kendall could see some of the planes on the line.

He scooped Marco up and carried him around to the passenger's side and placed him in the seat.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Fifteen minutes to the hospital, which is on a hill and has a nice flat lawn out front."

"Are you kidding? You almost killed us both the last time I let you fly this thing. This is no fighter, Kendall."

"Just sit there and shut up."

Kendall trotted to the other door as the blonde woman appeared around the corner of the office building, marching woodenly with his .38 held straight out and high in both hands, like a blank-eyed, white-faced spectre brought to life by the fog.

She fired, the slug ricochetting from the concrete.

Kendall yelled, the words lost as the gun coughed again, sending an angry bee past his head.

She kept coming. There were three more cartridges in the gun, and she couldn't miss with all of them.

*There are no styles when it comes to staying alive, Kendall.*

He scooped up Marco's .45.

She fired again, drilling a hole in the plexiglass door where his head had been.

Kendall leveled the .45. "Stop!"

She kept coming, her face set.

Kendall fired.

The woman spun and collapsed a few feet from Ryder.

Kendall dropped the .45 and stood, an emptiness inside, before climbing into the helicopter.

He took it up through the thinning fog smoothly, the image of the two bodies on the helipad below staying with him. One of the woman's arms was extended as though her last thought was to reach for Ryder.

By the time he was halfway to the hospital, the radio had the police on the way to the airfield and to meet him when he landed.

**I**t was noon before the surgeon, his face showing the strain, came up to him and shook his head.

"It just wasn't possible, Mr. Kendall. Too much damage."

Kendall ran a hand over his face. "If I had known, I'd have let him die at the airfield. He would have preferred that."

"You can't take it on yourself to decide where and how a person dies."

"I decided for the woman," said Kendall.

Helmley, the lean police chief who had met the helicopter and listened to the story, put a hand on his shoulder.

"Listen, you had no choice. You didn't know Ryder's wife. I did. She moved here to be close to the prison. She was out there every visiting day for five years. She lived for the day he'd get out and, for all we know, helped him make that break. When he died, I guess she felt she had nothing left and had to kill the people who had robbed her of what she had been waiting for. In a way, you have to admire her. There aren't many people, men or women, who make a commitment like that."

Kendall shrugged. "Maybe, but that doesn't make it any easier. I'll fly the chopper back, pick up my car, and meet you at your office to sign any papers you need."

"I can have someone do that."

Kendall shook his head. "Just keep the news people off my back."

He set the chopper down precisely and brushed through the questions from the reporters and the aircraft owners of Marco's office and closed the door.

The athletic bag lay on its side, as though the woman had thrown it away when she came running in for the .38 she had refused to take with her.

Kendall placed it on the desk and sank into Marco's chair, wondering why things happened the way they did.

If he had arrived at the field an hour later, Marco and the Ryders would have been gone and none of this would have happened.

Marco could have taken care of himself. The .45 under the seat showed that.

The .45. Kendall's fingers drummed slowly on the desk. The only reason for it to be there was that Marco had expected trouble, but what trouble could he have expected in a helicopter used for flying lessons and sightseeing?

It was as though he knew that Ryder was coming and had hidden it there last night.

Kendall reached for the bag and zipped it open.

Banded stacks of money had been crammed inside.

He didn't have to count it. The fifty thousand Ryder had stolen had never been recovered.

It began to come together then.

The woman had waited in the lounge all night, yet Marco would have known the weather for the entire East Coast, would have known no plane would arrive that morning.

When he peered into the office, Ryder hadn't really been pointing the automatic at Marco, and he had been pleading with him to fly him out as much as threatening him.

To Helmsley or anyone else, it looked, and would always look, just the way Kendall had told it. Even Kendall had believed it had happened exactly that way.

Until now.

Ryder had escaped and headed for the field where the woman was waiting with the money. She must have made a deal with Marco to fly them out, but Ryder had become lost in the fog and Kendall had arrived before he could get there.

Still, it would have come off if he hadn't interfered.

And Marco would have been in the clear because there was no way anyone could prove he hadn't been forced to fly them out at gunpoint.

The .45 under the seat had been his insurance that he would live to spend his fee—and perhaps more than that. He could have intended to use it to collect all the money in the bag.

If Kendall had financial troubles, so did he. The banks were breathing down his back as hard as they were breathing down Kendall's. Marco was close to losing the field.

But it had fallen apart for one reason only. Ryder would never let both of them into that helicopter so Marco had used the .45 to get Kendall off the hook when he could have stood by, let Ryder kill him, and still do whatever he intended to do.

Knowing Marco, Kendall would have bet he would have walked away with all the money.

"Damn," said Kendall.

He fanned a stack of bills. Found money. Tax free money. If Marco had taken it away from them, no one could prove he had it, any more than they could prove he hadn't been forced to fly them out.

Fifty thousand dollars. Not much by some standards, but money was relative to the needs of the person holding it in his hands.

Fifty thousand was enough to give Ryder's wife her dream: life with her husband and without guns.

Fifty thousand was enough to get the banks and creditors off Marco's back.

And fifty thousand was enough for a financially strapped businessman to mail his ex-wife a fat check each month from a business that was in trouble, and enough for him to keep the Mustang to fly when the pressures became too great, to leave them behind as that big, four-bladed prop chewed its way upward to where the air was clean and the sun flashed along the polished aluminum of the wings.

All Kendall had to do was close the bag and carry it with him to his car. No one knew the bag had belonged to Mrs. Ryder, no one knew what was in it, and no one would know that he had it.

It was just an ordinary, inexpensive, plastic trimmed, dark blue athletic bag with bright red stripes down the center, like millions of others, and it could have held anything.

Except a justifiable excuse for a man to profit from the deaths of three people. All it held was money. And grief.

Outside, the fog had left a legacy of sparkling moisture on the grass. The sky was pure and blue, cotton candy clouds scattered. It was a day to fly high, to see what an eagle sees. I have loosed the surly bonds of earth, a poet had said, which was probably the only way it could be said.

Kendall wished he could have taken Mrs. Ryder there just once to show her there was more, much more, beyond the small horizon she'd built around herself. Perhaps the sad lines in her face would not have been etched so deeply.

He zipped the bag closed viciously, curled his fingers through the handles, brought his arm up and around in a tight, furious arc, and hurled the bag with all his strength against the wall.

# The Two Ninety-Nine Alibi



by William J. Reynolds

**T**o my knowledge, I'd never been anyone's alibi before. Or since. But you never know.

I stood in Teri Ellis's apartment and thought, if you turn out to be somebody's alibi, she was a better somebody than some I could think of. She lived down the hall from me in the apartment building at Forty-fifth and Decatur—only there was no hall. The place is constructed like a motel, with all eighteen units opening to the

great outdoors. Teri's apartment was at the opposite end from mine along the suspended sidewalk. It was the mirror image of my unit, and I found the effect a little jarring. I turned my attention from the backward apartment to Teri.

My attention liked that better. Teri was a petite, slender woman, twenty-six or -seven, with a quick laugh and perpetually amused eyes, long dark hair in lazy curls, and a dancer's body, shown to some advantage

*Illustration by Jim Ceribello*



by the faded T-shirt and shorts she wore on this hot Saturday afternoon. I didn't really know her except to say hello to on the steel stairs out front or in the laundry room around back. I knew nothing about her. I'd never even been in her apartment before. But now, evidently, I stood between her and a jail stretch. I was her alibi.

Being an alibi is rather like jury duty. You don't go looking for it. It comes after you like a heat-seeking missile, and there's not a lot you can do about it if you're the target. I said as much to Westby—Sergeant Brian Westby, Omaha Police Division, Burglary—but it didn't cheer him up any.

"Let's go over it one more time," Westby said unenthusiastically. It's what cops say when they're stuck but too stubborn to admit it.

"That's a good idea," I said. "If we go over it one more time, you won't have to carry it back to the station. It'll be flat enough that you can fold it up, stick it in an envelope, and mail it to yourself."

The broad, sort of blunt-edged cop looked at me but said nothing. I regretted having succumbed to my natural inclination to crack wise. I didn't know Westby very well, just a nodding acquaintance developed over the years as I was in and out of the Walnut Hill station

on this or that errand—the kind of errands that come fewer and farther between as I devote less of my time to the private-eye dodge and more to the equally munificent freelance-writing business—but I knew that, like most Omaha cops, he was a decent sort, just a guy trying to do his dirty, thankless, sometimes dangerous job. And I knew that working Burglary is almost as much fun as a summer cold.

Teri Ellis was less-tenderhearted than I. She slumped in the flower-print reclining chair she occupied and crossed her ankles on the edge of the coffee table. "He's right," she sighed mightily, meaning me. "We've been over this and over this. First last night, all night, at the station. Then again this morning, all morning, here." She looked at a black-banded sport watch on her tanned wrist. "It's now twelve fifty-three," she said with the annoying precision of digital-watch wearers. "Don't you think it's time to admit you're wrong and leave gracefully? I've been more than cooperative all along, you have to admit. But this is coming awfully close to police harassment. . . ."

"I'm not wrong," Westby murmured, then turned to look out her window. The day was bright and sunny and hot—unseasonably so for early May in

this part of the country—and the traffic on the northwest Radial Highway, which our building fronted, was accordingly heavy. Westby turned back and repeated, with more conviction, “I’m *not* wrong. I know it was you who broke into the Hanley’s townhouse last night. I know it was you whom they surprised at about nine o’clock, when they returned home early. I know it was you who brained Hanley on your way past him out the door, ran down the block to a red or maroon hatchback vehicle, and sped off. A neighbor identified you.”

“A neighbor identified *somebody*,” she retorted with barely concealed impatience. “Somebody dressed in dark pants, sneakers, and windbreaker. A guy.”

“A *little* guy. Could be a woman.”

“Could be a little guy. And how many red or maroon hatchbacks are there in a city the size of Omaha?”

“The neighbor caught the last three digits of the license plate,” Westby reiterated for the third time to my knowledge, and I hadn’t been in on the all-nighter at the station. “The computer generated a list of possible first and second digits, which we cross-referenced against the DPS computer in Lincoln. Only two dozen red or maroon hatchbacks registered in this county

have license numbers ending in 878. Only *one* of those belongs to a convicted burglar: A red 1984 Volkswagen Rabbit, license-plate number 1-16878, registered to one Theresa A. Ellis.”

She folded her arms around her ribs, putting her breasts into relief against the cotton shirt. “But I’m clean,” she said stubbornly. “I have been ever since I did my stretch.” She looked at me, standing against the doorjamb, where there was a little breeze through the open door. “I’m sorry you have to hear all this. It’s not something I’m proud of. A few years ago I was . . . well, pretty messed up. I was living with this guy, and . . .” She shrugged. “We pulled a few jobs together, then I pulled a few by myself. Then I got caught, did eighteen months, and got out about a year ago. And I’ve been straight ever since,” she said for the cop’s benefit.

“This latest string started about a year ago,” Westby said monotonously. “The method’s the same in all of them, and it fits your M.O.—victims fairly upscale, but not so much so that they’d have burglar alarms, guard dogs, or safes; occupants out for an evening, giving you plenty of time to work; houses full of jewelry, silver, small electronics, some cash, things easy to unload; and very careful

planning, casing, and execution. Professional. Oh, not like picklocks and grappling hooks and the other comic-book kind of stuff. More like pop an unobtrusive window—like the one in the Hanley's garage—get in, get out, and get going. Only it didn't work so smooth last night, did it?"

He regarded me. "What about you, Nebraska," he said belligerently, waving his phony-leather notepad for emphasis. "You sticking to your story?"

Forget what I said about feeling sorry for having spouted off at him. "Remember me," I said, "the innocent bystander? I was over in my place, fat, dumb, and happy, busy solidifying my position as the world's greatest soon-to-be-published detective novelist, when you came pounding on my door. I didn't volunteer. You asked me about last night and I told you. If you're so sensitive, you shouldn't ask questions you might not like the answers to."

Westby rubbed his temple with a corner of the notepad. "You were home alone . . ."

I took a breath and shifted over to the other jamb to give my left shoulder a break. "I was home alone. I was in my bedroom, which is also my office, working on my second novel." I liked to get that *second* in there, even though the first one had yet to appear. "I came out

to the kitchen for a coffee refill." I automatically nodded toward Teri's kitchen, the exact reverse of mine—well, okay, hers was a lot neater—and, like mine, separated from the living room mainly by imagination. "The phone rang. I answered it, naturally enough, and it was Teri. She asked if I was watching television. I, furiously committed to the truth, said I was not. She said she had just turned on her set to watch *Falcon Crest*—her favorite show, she said—"

Teri grinned sheepishly and shrugged.

"—but was getting nothing but snow and noise on Channel 6. I flipped on my set, saw the opening clips of Napa Valley pretending to be Tuscany Valley, and reported same to her. She said she had been having trouble with her set, resigned herself to missing this week's thrilling episode, thanked me, and rang off. I shut off the set, went back to work, and forgot all about it until you came rapping on my door this morning."

"What time was this?"

"About ten thirty; you were there."

"I mean, what time last night."

"Ohhhh. I think I'll get a phonograph record made of it so's you can play it over and over to your little heart's content. As I've said, I don't know

what time that was. I never wear my watch when I write because I lazily rest my left wrist on the edge of the keyboard, where the band would catch. I know it was late. I know it was dark. I know it must have been nine o'clock, give or take a minute, because that's the time the program airs, isn't it?"

Westby tilted his face toward the ceiling and slowly scratched his Adam's apple. "Yea-ah. The show came across from CBS and went out locally at nine on the button. We checked with WOW." The venerable WOW has been WOLT for ten years or better, but the old habits die hard.

"Well, *then*," said Teri Ellis.

Westby snubbed her and focused on me. "You're sure it was her."

"Positive."

"And you're sure she was *here*."

"Absolutely. I saw her. My phone was on top of the TV, and my TV is right next to the door, like Teri's here, and when she said who she was I kind of automatically looked out my door—I had the front door open because I was trying to trick a stray breeze into coming through the screen door—and down the walkway, which, as you can see, runs straight to this door. And there was Teri, standing here, in her door-

way. She waved at me."

"Real convenient all the way around."

"Isn't it though? You know, it's no real coincidence that Teri's set occupies the same relative spot as mine. In this building, TV reception's nil unless you're hooked to the rooftop antenna that our landlord, in his legendary generosity, provides. But he gives you only about twelve inches of that flat brown twin-lead antenna cable, coming out the side of the electrical outlet plate right there"—I pointed to the Bakelite plate behind Teri's television, two feet from the door, but Westby was uninterested—"so you can see there's no place *else* for a television set, unless you're fond of tripwires all over your home."

"I went out and bought a fifty foot length of that cable and rigged alligator clips to the leads so I can wheel the TV back to the bedroom," Teri volunteered. That would work better for her than for me: my set, which weighed eighteen hundred pounds, was propped on a beat-up old coffee table shoved against the wall, while her sleek portable stood on the top shelf of a nice fake-wood wheeled cart, with a slim, expensive-looking VCR on the bottom shelf.

"I hate to interrupt this installment of *The Hobby Shop*," Westby growled, "but I do have

a burglary, a whole bunch of burglaries, to investigate here."

"Sorry, Wes, but it doesn't really look like it," I said quietly.

"Face it: I'm on the up-and-up," Teri said, not unsympathetically. "You made a mistake. Your eyewitness made a mistake. Or someone doctored his license plate—you know, used electrician's tape to make a three into an eight or a one into a seven . . ."

"I know how it works," Westby snapped. "And I know I'm not wrong. I know that you pulled that job last night. I know you've pulled half a dozen or more since the first of last year. And I know *you* know that I know—"

"I'll confess," I said, "if you promise to stop right there."

Westby looked at me, looked at the girl, looked back in obvious indecision. When he spoke at last, it was to me: "Shut up," he said with feeling, and left. I stopped the screen door from banging after him.

Teri and I exchanged glances. "He forgot to tell us not to leave town," I said.

It, or maybe just good etiquette, produced a small laugh. "I'm sorry to drag you into all this," she reiterated.

My thoughts were elsewhere. "No problem," I mumbled gallantly.

"I wish I could do something to make up for your time and

trouble . . . are you doing anything for dinner?"

My thoughts came home again fast. "No," I said truthfully.

"Well, would you like to have dinner with me? If you don't mind eating with ex-cons, that is."

I smiled at her. "Depends on the con."

**T**he talk of television series and what-not had made me think of a good deed I could do. Koosje—Koosje Van der Beek, who I guess is my girlfriend even though the word sounds ridiculous applied to anyone over the age of eighteen—had lent me her car for the weekend, since mine was visiting its home away from home, a garage at Thirty-fourth and Cuming. Koosje was in Lincoln all weekend attending some sort of goody-two-shoes profession-development seminar or some-such, so she hadn't been able to pick up her new VCR, which had come in Friday afternoon. I thought it'd be a nice gesture if I got the thing, took it over to her place, and had it up and running for her return Sunday evening.

As the man said, no good deed goes unpunished. The back of the Scandinavian-style shelving unit where Koosje parked all her audio-visual equipment



was a mess of wires, cables, and cords. Her having cable TV only exacerbated the situation. Luckily, the VCR was a replacement for one that had gone where all good little consumer-electronics go when they die, so through a combination of guesswork, the owner's manual, and a couple of lengths of unused coaxial cable hanging around where the old machine used to be, I was able to figure what connected to what and what all the extra little splitters and switches and sundry were for. Another year to tune in eleventy-seven cable channels, and I was done.

And with only one part left over.

It was a little black plastic box, rectangular, about the size of a piece of candy. The top and sides were flat, but from the bottom cropped a short cylinder protecting a quarter-inch long pin. Below that were two Philips screws.

I went through the book again but could find nothing pertaining to this little guy. I checked over the backs of the TV and the recorder, but it looked as if everything that could be screwed, plugged in, or covered was screwed, plugged in, or covered. I turned on both machines, flipped the lever on the VCR from *VIDEO* to *TV* and back a few times, ran through all the channels, even put in a

blank tape (I hoped) and tried the VCR's built-in timer. Everything worked like the proverbial charm.

Finally I gave up and balanced the doohickey on the shelf next to the TV. I stared at it for a few minutes like I expected it to say something profound. Then I picked it up again and pocketed it.

**T**eri Ellis was a better cook than I am, and if that's damning her with faint praise, so be it. She gas-broiled hamburgers stuffed with blue cheese, tomato, and onion, fixed a crisp spinach salad, and boiled a package of frozen vegetables. Dessert was courtesy of Sealtest. By eight thirty we had eased into her living room, which seemed much larger than mine since it didn't have books crammed into every available space. I was looking out the front door when she came into the room with two cups of coffee.

"It's nice that the days are getting longer, isn't it?" she said, setting the cups on her small coffee table. She positioned herself on the couch. "Have a seat."

"Sure. Mind if I put on the TV—there's a good show on. . . ." I hit the toggle before she could reply. The "instant-on" set sprang into action.

"There's nothing good on Sat-

urday ni—" She froze, stared at the picture, glanced at her VCR to assure herself it was indeed off, looked at me.

I turned down the volume. A little of the *Falcon Crest* theme goes a long way with me. "I thought maybe you'd like to watch this week's episode, since you missed it last night."

She said nothing.

"You're not going to ask me how I accomplished this seeming miracle? I'm disappointed. But then—you *know* how it's done, don't you?" I pulled the gizmo out of my pocket. "I came across this for the first time this afternoon—not this very one, one just like it; I got this at Radio Shack for two ninety-nine."

"So?"

"So this is what you need to hook up a VCR to the type of antenna we have here, the kind with the flat cable leads. You attach the ends—the spade lugs, as the guy at the store called them—to these little screws here. Then you merely snap the part with the pin over the input post on back of the VCR. The VCR I hooked up this afternoon didn't need this little transformer because the owner has cable TV, which comes over a different kind of cable, coaxial, the round type that ends in a pin arrangement like this."

"An 'F' plug."

"That's right, and it fits right onto the post, bringing the TV

signal into the VCR. Then you take another little piece of cable and run it from the VCR output post into the back of the television set, and that's how you get to watch videotapes."

"I already know all of this."

"Yes, you do. You know a lot about the subject. 'F' connectors and alligator clips and like that. So surely you would know that your TV's being on the blink wouldn't have anything to do with your ability to videotape a broadcast. VCRs have their own tuners; they don't need TVs at all, except for playing back tapes. If your set really was malfunctioning last night—and it wasn't—you could have simply taped your show and watched it later. And you *did* tape the show, of course."

Again, no comment.

"You taped it at nine, when it went out. You set the VCR timer to catch it because you were out . . . working. When the job turned sour, you had to find some way to prove you had been *here* when in fact you were *there* at nine o'clock when the Hanleys interrupted you. Did it occur to you in the car as you raced home, or had you noodled it out in advance?"

She crossed her long legs and folded her arms lazily. "I don't have the slightest idea what you're talking about."

"I recognize this scene. The handsome detective is supposed

to say, 'Ah, but you do . . . ' Ah, *but you do!* You know that just as what goes up must come down, what goes in must—or may—go out. If you slip this—"I raised the tiny black box"—off the input post and onto the output post, then the VCR's recorded signal goes up the cable to the antenna and out into the wide world. Well, not so wide: the man at the electronics store didn't think you'd get more than a fifty foot radius, depending on the antenna, and if I know our landlord, ours is none too swell. But fifty feet would be enough to ensure that your fellow tenants would receive your illegal broadcast—the opening minutes of *Falcon Crest*, tape-delayed, as they say in the biz—and that you could fool one of them into believing you were home at nine on the button."

"If I did that, then everybody in the building would see the same thing. They'd be calling the station to complain. But Westby said he'd checked with the station, and he didn't say anything about their getting any calls."

"Goofy things happen with TV signals all the time. Some jerk forgets to turn this or that switch and you get a few seconds of another soundtrack over whatever you're watching. As long as it doesn't persist, no one bothers to complain. That's what you were counting on: you knew

you couldn't risk more than a few seconds. So you set up your machine, rewound your tape to the start, and called me. You knew I didn't have my set on but that I was home—you could see from the street that the living room was dark but the bedroom lighted. You stood in your doorway so that you could see through my open door when the glow of the television appeared. That's when you hit the *play* button on your remote control. You let it run long enough for me to see what you wanted me to see, you watched until you saw the light from my set extinguished, and then you shut off your VCR. If it took more than a minute, I'd be surprised. Which reminds me—"

I grabbed her phone from an end table and started dialing.

"Who do you think you're calling?"

"My place—Westby. Yes, better shut it off before you have the FCC on your neck. Or the tenants. No, I think she gets the idea. Right." I replaced the receiver and looked at the TV. The taped picture ended abruptly, there were a couple of flips, and then an engine of destruction masquerading as a helicopter filled the screen. I turned off the set.

"What idea do I get?"

"That we've got you at the Hanleys' at nine—not a positive I.D., but darn good—and

here creating a phony alibi some time later."

She spread her arms. "You can look at every videotape I own and you won't find a single second of *Falcon Crest*. All you've proved is that someone *could* have created an alibi the way you describe, not that I did. And it would have been pretty chancy in any case. What if you had looked at a clock?"

"That part *was* chancy. My not wearing a watch was a lucky break for you. But you'd be playing the possibility that you could get away with your scheme against the certainty that you would go to jail if you couldn't. It was a chance that had to be taken. As to the other: there are eighteen units in this building. Twenty-eight tenants. Of those, you and I are accounted for. Of the rest, Westby has interviewed twenty-one. Of those, eighteen were watching television last night between nine and eleven. Of *those*, one hundred percent report that at about nine forty-five, whatever channel they were watching was interrupted for a few seconds by your show. No, we don't have Polaroid photos of you burgling the Hanleys' townhouse. But I think we do have what Judge Wapner would call a preponderance of evidence, don't you?"

She sighed. "Where did you get the tape?"

"Are you kidding? This is a top-rated show we're talking about, and everybody and his kid sister has a VCR these days. Westby and I each made a few calls; he found a friend who taped last night's installment and hadn't recorded over it yet—as, no doubt, you *did* immediately after setting me up as your alibi. We rigged a machine in my apartment in a manner that is oh-so-familiar to you, I kept our date, then repaid your hospitality by going to the door just now and signaling Westby, down in my apartment, to roll 'em." I held the black transformer between thumb and forefinger and made a show of admiring it. "For two ninety-nine, I think the effect was worth it, don't you?"

If she did, she kept it to herself. My coffee was getting cold. I hoisted the cup, drained it at a gulp, and returned it to its saucer.

Teri sat motionless, her eyes and thoughts somewhere else. Westby appeared at the screen door, but didn't enter. We traded glances.

I don't know what he was thinking. I was thinking it would probably be bad form to ask Teri if I could have her VCR while she was in jail.

FICTION

# The Mysterious Affair of the Beaird- Wynnington Dirigible Airship



by Charlotte MacLeod

Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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“Well, Papa, so you have saved the Empire yet again.” The Honorable Ermentine Ditherby-Stoat, irrepressible daughter of Britain’s foremost cabinet minister, held up her face for the expected kiss of greeting. “How many rescues does this one make?”

“Jolly decent of you to take the trouble, sir, if I may be permitted to say so,” stammered young Gerald Potherton, who was never far from Ermentine’s side when propriety admitted his presence.

Lord Ditherby-Stoat allowed a hint of a smile to play about his patrician features as he handed his hat, stick, and dispatch case to Figgletton, his butler and trusted confidant. Then he stooped, for he was a tall man, and bestowed the awaited caress on his daughter’s damask cheek.

“Have our guests arrived?”

“Her Ladyship is in the drawing room with Mrs. Swiveltree, Madame Vigée-Lenoir, Mr. Hellespont, and Mr. Whipsnade, my lord,” replied Figgletton. “Count Bratvuschenko has telegraphed that he will arrive on the seven o’clock train.”

“But that will hardly give him time to dress for dinner,” protested Ermentine. “Really, Papa, does England expect us to turn Havering into a wild animal refuge every weekend?”

“England expects every man to do his duty,” said Lord Ditherby-Stoat with quiet firmness, “and your parents expect no less of you, my dear.”

With that, he passed through the massive oaken doors which Figgletton, having adroitly disposed of the hat, the cane, and the dispatch case, now held open for him. Ermentine and her adoring Gerald followed, she only somewhat subdued by her father’s admonition and far more aware of her mother’s stately presence.

Lady Ditherby-Stoat had been, and indeed still was, the fourth of the seven beautiful daughters of the Earl of Cantilever. Yet it was not the simply-cut but sumptuous gown of deep green brocaded velvet or the modest parure of emeralds and diamonds that sparkled at ears, arms, fingers, and bosom, nor yet the matching tiara resting lightly upon her impeccably coiffed pale golden hair that betrayed her aristocratic origin. Rather, it was the calm, unruffled patience with which she endured the conversation of Mr. Silas Whipsnade that provided the ultimate test of true breeding.

The Honorable Ermentine, infected with the reckless gaiety of the *siècle* now at its *fin*, was less circumspect. “Whatever do you suppose prompted Papa to invite that impossible Mr. Whipsnade?”

she murmured to her doting escort once her father had moved away from them to greet his wife and the oddly-assorted group he had caused to be assembled at one of England's stateliest mansions. "In my opinion, he's a bounder and quite possibly a cad."

"Ermy, dear," drawled Mr. A. Lysander Hellespont with the familiarity of one who had known her since her pram-and-nanny days, "Whipsnade is merely an American. Let us not be intolerant."

"I at least shall not tolerate his insulting Ermentine by any unwelcome attention," stated young Potherton fiercely.

"Ah, our dauntless fireater. You are fortunate, Ermy, to have so stalwart a protector. Now I must go and make intelligent conversation with Madame Vigée-Lenoir, though I fear that, as a confirmed bachelor, I am singularly ill-adapted to discussing the subject which has brought her to England."

"And what is that?" demanded Ermentine, favoring Hellespont with one of her *gamine* smiles.

"She is making a study of baby-caré facilities for the working poor."

Unless Madame Vigée-Lenoir was herself a nursing mother, the costume she had chosen seemed ill-adapted to reflect so serious a purpose. It was of diaphanous black tulle, cut remarkably low in the bosom and flashing with spangles along the edges of its many coquettish flounces. However, she and the dandified man-about-town appeared to find some common ground for conversation, judging from the merry twinkle in her dark eyes and the assiduity with which Hellespont twirled the ends of his dashing mustache as they chatted, he in flawlessly accented French and she in quaint broken English.

"I say, Mrs. Swiveltree looks smashing tonight," exclaimed Gerald Potherton, as well he might. The titian-haired beauty had chosen to array herself in a creation—for no such prosaic word as "gown" could suffice—of amethyst satin, cut extremely *décolleté* and slightly *en train*, its flowing breadths embroidered *à la japonaise* in a design of peacocks. Real peacock feathers nodded from her high-piled coiffure, their shimmering hues reflected in the heavy necklace of beryls and carbuncles that adorned her superb bust.

"Mrs. Swiveltree always looks smashing," said Ermentine dryly. "How else could she advertise the ever-growing wealth derived from her husband's vast shipping interests?"

"And where is the nabob himself? Off in one of his ships?"

"No, at home nursing his gout. Cadwallader Swiveltree is old



enough to be her father, you know."

Older men did seem to take a fatherly interest in Mrs. Swiveltree, Gerald Potherton thought, though he had sufficient savoir faire not to say so. Lord Ditherby-Stoat was at the moment giving the shipping magnate's young wife his full and undivided attention. Could the rumors circulating through the club smoking rooms have some basis in fact? Despite his tender years, Potherton was not without some measure of sophistication. He knew men took mistresses, even cabinet ministers married to daughters of earls. But he thrust the notion from his mind. It would be the act of a cad to speculate on such a matter, here at Haverings with Ermentine at his side.

Little did he know that Ermentine was thinking along the same lines. It was for that very reason that she was about to divert her father's attention when Figgletton forestalled her, entering the room with a large silver salver on which reposed a smallish oblong, wrapped in paper that bore the royal crest. Impassive as ever, the butler yet conveyed a feeling of pride as he approached Lord Ditherby-Stoat.

"From the Queen's Messenger, my lord."

"Thank you, Figgletton." Lord Ditherby-Stoat took the package into his hands and held it a long moment before, with a murmured apology to his guests, he divested the object of its gala wrappings.

"Why, it's a copy of *Leaves from a Journal of Our Life in the Highlands*," cried Ermentine, who had been shamelessly peeping over her father's shoulder. "Inscribed in her own hand! Oh, Papa!"

Casting decorum to the winds, the company swarmed to view with their own eyes the magical signature, "Victoria R.," and the inscription, "With Our heartfelt thanks." Even Lady Ditherby-Stoat so far forgot herself as to exclaim, "Jolly well done, Edmund!"

"Then we may opine," said Mr. Whipsnade in a loud, ill-bred voice, "that you've pulled off the Beaird-Wynnington Dirigible Airship deal?"

"Since the newsboys are already braying out the tidings," Lord Ditherby-Stoat replied, "I believe I may not scruple to admit that such is the case."

"And Britain owes it all to you!" Mrs. Swiveltree's peacock feathers quivered with ill-suppressed emotion.

"I do not understand," said Madame Vigée-Lenoir. "What ees thees deereegeeble—bah, I cannot say eet."

"Suffice it to say, madame," A. Lysander Hellespont took it upon

himself to explain, "that it is a lighter-than-air machine in which persons will be conveyed from one place to another."

"Ah, oui, comme les frères Montgolfier."

"That's it. Precisely like a Montgolfier hot air balloon, but with certain differences."

"Vive la difference! Ah, je vois, you weel weesh *les couleurs britanniques*. It weel be you who get to choose zem, Lord Dizzerby-Stoat?"

"That, my dear lady, is a closely-guarded state secret, I fear," he replied whimsically, taking her dimpled arm in a manner that caused Mrs. Swiveltree's lips to tighten, a fact that did not escape the vigilant Ermentine.

Nor did it elude her notice that the despicable Mr. Whipsnade had edged yet closer to her father and his seductive companion, as if to catch any unguarded word that might fall from the statesman's lips under the influence of Madame Vigée-Lenoir's too-visible allurements. Ermentine was about to thrust herself and her Galahad into the breach, assuming one could be found, when another diversion presented itself. Figgletton announced, "Count Bratvushenko," and a dancing bear cavorted into the drawing room.

Such, at least, was the Honorable Ermentine's impression. The Russian diplomat, for diplomat he must be, else her father would hardly have offered him the hospitality of Haverings, appeared ill-fitted and certainly ill-barbered for his role. At least he was already arrayed in evening dress, far from impeccable but lavishly bedizened with a wide red sash across his corpulent shirt front, far too many gems on his fingers, and a galaxy of foreign orders pinned to his coat. He bowed so low over Lady Ditherby-Stoat's hand that the decorations clanked together like the clashing of arms on a distant battlefield, saluted the other ladies in like manner, shook hands among the gentlemen with a vigor that left them wincing, then stood glaring about him like a wild animal expecting to be fed.

As if divining the Muscovite's requirements, Figgletton reappeared, bearing a huge silver wine cooler filled with iced champagne. Following him were footmen carrying trays of crystal goblets and quantities of caviar heaped like tiny jewels in jasperware bowls from the kilns of Josiah Wedgwood, for Lord Ditherby-Stoat conceived it his patriotic duty to Buy British whenever possible.

"A toast!" cried Hellespont when all were served. "To Lord Dith-

erby-Stoat and the Beaird-Wynnington Dirigible Airship."

His eye was upon Mrs. Swiveltree as he spoke, since it was well known that the elderly and irascible shipping magnate to whom she was so inappositely espoused was vehemently opposed to the mere concept of airborne vehicles in any form, and even forbade the feeding of pigeons in his park. Nevertheless, Mrs. Swiveltree drank with the rest, and held out her empty glass for more.

Not so the Russian. Having drained the bubbly to the dregs, he hurled the empty goblet full at the fireplace. Fortunately, the omniscient Figgletton had prudently stationed there one of the footmen, a shining light of the local cricket crease in his off-duty hours. John dexterously fielded the fragile bit of crystal without cracking either the glass or Lady Ditherby-Stoat's composure.

"Right smart operator, that butler," Mr. Whipsnade remarked audibly to Mrs. Swiveltree. "Poor relation, I opine? Favors His Lordship a lot, don't he."

Even the uncouth Whipsnade could hardly have uttered a more ill-chosen remark. The resemblance between the great statesman and his major domo was indeed obvious, and the reason not far to seek. Among the buxom lasses of the countryside, the gallantries of His Lordship's late grandfather—and indeed of a certain more recent member of his family—had been notorious. The bond between master and servant was indubitably strengthened by ties of blood.

And was that cause for opprobrium on either side? As butler in so stately a home as Haverings, Figgletton had risen to the same eminence in his sphere of life as had Lord Ditherby-Stoat in the loftier halls of parliament. Why should any find it remarkable that a well-deserved mutual regard might exist between two men of such stature? Still, it was an embarrassing moment. A hasty babble ensued as everybody strove at once to change the subject. Under its cover, Lady Ditherby-Stoat made her way to her husband's side.

"Edmund," she murmured, "you have brought the plans for the Beaird-Wynnington Dirigible Airship to Haverings, have you not?"

He inclined his leonine head gravely. "How you divined the ruse, my dear, I do not know; but the fact remains that I have."

"Are you totally mad?" she all but hissed. "Could you not have left them under lock and key at the War Office?"

"Quite frankly," he replied, "I durst not. Even before negotiations had been fairly completed, bombs had been planted by the Anarchists, the Nihilists, the Separatists, the Prohibitionists, and the

Folklore Society. I had an uneasy premonition that mischief might be afoot. Fear not, my dear. The plans are perfectly safe. Only we and Figgletton know where they now repose."

At that moment the unspeakable Whipsnade, who had sneaked close during their private conversation, was so unfortunate as to sneeze, thus calling attention to his unprincipled tactics. It was at once apparent to all that Lord and Lady Ditherby-Stoat had been discussing the whereabouts of the invaluable documents for which Lord Ditherby-Stoat had labored so adroitly and successfully. Lady Ditherby-Stoat immediately recovered her customary composure, but it was too late. Everyone present had caught the slight crisping of her gloved fingers, the slight tightening of her lips.

She masked it well. "Figgletton," she said imperiously to the butler, who was assiduously engaged in refilling Count Bratvushenko's glass for the fourteenth time or thereabout, "the Dowager Lady Ditherby-Stoat is not yet down. Go and discern whether she requires assistance."

As Figgletton passed out of the room, Lord Ditherby-Stoat took occasion to intercept him and add in a tone too low for even Whipsnade's ears, "And make certain our confidential matter is securely disposed of."

Too discreet to reply by word or sign, the butler went about his mission. It could not but be observed that Lord and Lady Ditherby-Stoat hovered thenceforth close to the massive oaken doors, ostensibly to greet the dowager when she made her entrance, but in fact to make sure the butler was not trailed by the regrettable Whipsnade. Or so, at least, it was surmised by the Honorable Ermentine and her young knight-at-arms.

Needless to say, all were agog for Figgletton's reappearance. It was, therefore, an anticlimax when the drawing room was next entered not by that august figure but by a mousy wisp of a middle-aged woman in a limp garment of some unappealing gray fabric. She approached Lady Ditherby-Stoat with humble steps and half-whispered, "My lady, I am sent to inform you that Her Dowager Ladyship will not be coming down."

"Nonsense, Twiddle," said the mistress of the great house sternly. "Return at once and remind her that we go in to dinner in precisely three minutes' time."

"I fear the summons will be of no avail, my lady. Saturn has gone retrograde."

"How bothersome of Saturn," drawled Mrs. Swiveltree. "Couldn't

it have waited until after dinner? Now your table won't balance, Honoria."

"Her Dowager Ladyship will not emerge from her rooms again until Mars enters the house of Leo," Miss Twiddle explained with that meek stubbornness which the rich and powerful find so exasperating in the genteel poor.

"Then you must take her place, Twiddle," said Lady Ditherby-Stoat. "I cannot allow Saturn to upset my seating arrangements. Mr. Whipsnade, you will take in Miss Twiddle."

"And serve him right," whispered the incorrigible Ermentine.

Whatever retort Gerald Potherton might have made was lost in the stir that greeted the butler's return. Abandoning all pretense at detachment, Lord Ditherby-Stoat hastened to meet him at the drawing room door. Almost at once, it became apparent to the entire company that the majestic, the impassive, Figgletton was in a state of near-collapse. "My lord," he gasped to the eminent statesman now so anxiously confronting him, "the plans for the Beaird-Wynnington Dirigible Airship are—"

Even as the word "gone" formed on his lips, the faithful retainer collapsed and expired at his master's feet.

"'E'as—'ow you say—faint!" cried Madame Vigée-Lenoir.

"I fear not," responded A. Lysander Hellespont, whose dilettante manner masked keen powers of observation. "That trickle of gore on his shirt front and the knifelike object protruding from the region of the heart would rather indicate that Figgletton has been stabbed."

"You are right," confirmed Lord Ditherby-Stoat. "With a chastely ornamented gold-handled dagger such as might with propriety be carried by any lady or gentleman in full evening dress. My dear, I confess myself at a loss as to the handling of this untoward occurrence."

"There is only one thing to do," said Lady Ditherby-Stoat. Touching the bell, she summoned a footman. "James, remove Figgletton's corpse to the butler's pantry and tell Frederick to pour the hock. Mr. Hellespont, will you give me your arm?"

Picking up her cue, Lord Ditherby-Stoat offered his arm to the succulent Madame Vigée-Lenoir, leaving Mrs. Swiveltree, much to her dismay, to be escorted by the bearlike Russian count. Ermentine and Gerald, needless to say, were not to be parted. Nervous but ever-dutiful, the mouselike Miss Twiddle brought up the rear with Mr. Whipsnade.

One could hardly have expected gaiety to prevail among a company that had just witnessed the dreadful consequences of a murder, for murder it must have been. Even Lady Ditherby-Stoat appeared a trifle *distracte* as she discussed the novels of Lord Beaconsfield with Mr. Hellespont. It was Madame Vigée-Lenoir who managed to choke off Mr. Whipsnade's dismal rehashing of the horrendous event and save the occasion from degenerating into a mourning-party. With flashing smile and vivacious wit, she managed to lift all spirits save those of Miss Twiddle, to whom gaiety would have been inappropriate, and Count Bratvuschenko, who continued to deplore the barbarous English custom of not allowing glassware to be smashed even as he gourmandized freely among the many dainties proffered by the assiduous footmen who were valiantly upholding the hospitable tradition of Haverings even as their mentor Mr. Figgleton lay stiffening behind the baize doors with his pantry book laid upon his dagger-pierced bosom as a final token of respect.

Nor did Whipsnade enter into the spirit of stiff-upper-lip and play-the-game. His countenance grew steadily more dour as he responded in curt monosyllables to Miss Twiddle's feeble attempts to make proper dinner-table conversation.

"He's worried about which fork to use," Ermentine murmured wickedly to Gerald.

But Whipsnade's perturbation pierced far deeper than any fish slice. At last, to the astonishment and dismay of the company, he rose to his feet, overturning a glass of claret in his agitation. Heedless of the spreading crimson stain, he croaked in a tone more raucous than the cawing of the rooks on the battlements, "Enough of this heedless frivolity. A dastardly crime has been committed here tonight, and I, Silas Whipsnade, can no longer stifle the stern voice of conscience that cries aloud for redress. The name of the evil-doer is—"

He got no further. With a wild cry of "Arrgh!", Silas Whipsnade clutched at this throat and fell forward into a serving of *riz à l'empératrice*.

Count Bratvuschenko glanced up from his own plate. "One of zose untraceable Asiatic poizonz. It happen all ze time at zese diplomatic dinnerz." He went on eating his dinner: Lady Ditherby-Stoat rang for another footman. Ermentine addressed her father.

"Papa, we shall have to call the police, shall we not?"

"My dear, how can that be?" her father answered. "Have you no

apprehension of the dread consequences that would ensue should it become generally known that the plans of the Beaird-Wynnington Dirigible Airship have been stolen? But lest you deem me to have been culpably negligent, I must reveal to you that the late Silas Whipsnade was in fact the noted detective Augustus Fox, whom I myself engaged to guard the plans. The gallant fellow appears to have been on the verge of unmasking the malefactor when he was so foully done to death by some as yet undiscovered agency. Let us only remember that, however uncouth his methods of procedure, the alleged Silas Whipsnade gave his life in the service of his country. Take him away, Frederick, and fetch the port."

Lady Ditherby-Stoat gathered the eyes of the female members of the party and led them away from the dining room, leaving the men to find what solace they might within the depths of the cut-glass decanters. Circumstances being as they were, it was perhaps not surprising that they did not sit long over their port. Hardly an hour later, Lord Ditherby-Stoat, A. Lysander Hellespont, and young Gerald Potherton entered the drawing room.

"But where ees ze Count Bratvuschenko?" demanded Madame Vigée-Lenoir.

"M'yes," said Lord Ditherby-Stoat thoughtfully. "That is a penetrating observation of yours, Madame Vigée-Lenoir. It seems to me Count Bratvuschenko has been absent from our gathering for some time. Hellespont, have you noticed him lately?"

"Not I," disclaimed the suave man-about-town. "Potherton?"

The junior member of the group answered only by a shake of the head and a barely-suppressed hiccough.

"But zees ees terreeble," exclaimed the Frenchwoman. "All ze men deesappear."

"It is a pity," Mrs. Swiveltree agreed, with an ironic glance at Madame Vigée-Lenoir's exuberant décolletage. "Why could it not have been one of the women?"

Lady Ditherby-Stoat touched the bell for a footman. "James, go and see whether Count Bratvuschenko has retired. He may have become indisposed, being unused to British cooking."

"Considering how much of it he ate," Ermentine observed sotto voce, "I shouldn't be surprised."

Gerald responded by another hiccough and a shake of the head. "He was in fine fettle over the port. Dearest, I fear there may have been yet more foul play. Might you not drop a hint to your father about calling in another private detective?"



"Better still," cried Ermentine, "let us turn detectives ourselves. Come, a-sleuthing we shall go!"

Potherton held out a restraining hand. "Wait a moment, the footman is returning. Perhaps he has news of the count."

Much the same thought must have crossed Lord Ditherby-Stoat's mind, for he inquired, "Well, James, do you bring news of the count?"

"Yes and no, my lord, in a manner of speaking," the servant replied, in a tone of utter befuddlement. "What I mean to say, my lord, is that some of him's there and the rest of him isn't."

"How very unusual. My dear, if you will excuse me, I believe I ought to go and view this astonishing development myself."

"Oh, do let's all go," cried Mrs. Swiveltree, sensing that Madame Vigée-Lenoir was about to say the same thing.

Nobody, however, said what was in everybody's mind: namely, that since all the servants were faithful old retainers except the drab and mousy Miss Twiddle, whom none could dream capable of a stabbing, a poisoning, or indeed of any action calling for boldness and cunning; then the vicious murderer who was so adroitly decimating their numbers must, *ipso facto*, be a member of the house party.

Was it Hellespont, that enigma of the clubs and fashionable salons, whose source of income was cause for conjecture and whose predilection for such diversions as slow horses and fast women was well known? Was it Madame Vigée-Lenoir, whose reason for crossing the Channel might in truth have been something far, far removed from baby care? Mrs. Swiveltree had already intimated pretty strongly that she herself considered the voluptuous *gauloise* little more than a foreign adventuress.

And what of Mrs. Swiveltree herself? Was old Cadwallader's absence from this gathering prompted by gout or by guile? Could his known antipathy to the Beaird-Wynnington Dirigible Airship have driven him to send his wife here tonight ostensibly in defiance of his wishes but in fact to obtain and destroy the plans that could threaten his shipping interests? Mrs. Swiveltree might have her reservations about old Cadwallader as a *preux chevalier*, but of his generosity in the matter of jewels, frocks, millinery, country houses, carriages, and the other small amenities of his life she had no cause for complaint and no desire to disoblige her source of supply.

Gerald Potherton was a younger son, with his way to make in

the world. His attachment to the Honorable Ermentine might exclude him from suspicion, but how could he know His Lordship's daughter might not suddenly transfer her affections elsewhere, and who was to say that madcap miss hadn't put him up to it?

As for Count Bratvuschenko—well, they would just have to see.

And see they did. The door to the room that was to have been occupied by the foreign nobleman had been left open by the footman in his agitation. Through the orifice, all could see a heterogeneous group of objects dropped carelessly on the bed. There was a furry something that proved on closer inspection to be Bratvuschenko's bushy brown beard, as well as his luxuriant head of hair. There was his eyeglass, there were his medals, his sash, his tailcoat, and even his *embonpoint*.

"A padded waistcoat, by George!" exclaimed Hellespont. "The blighter was heavily disguised."

"But why would any man weesh to make heemself fat and ugly?" demanded Madame Vigée-Lenoir.

"That, madame, is a question we must all ask ourselves," replied Hellespont, "though I deem it more pertinent to consider where the former inhabitant of these trappings may be at this moment."

Well might he consider. Little did Hellespont know that even as he spoke, a figure far removed from the guzzling buffoon he had last seen at the dinner table was searching assiduously through Hellespont's own personal effects. Nor were the discoveries thus made of a particularly edifying nature. What was an intimate of Lord Ditherby-Stoat doing with a pack of marked cards in his possession, not to mention a threatening letter from his bookmaker and several photographs of the sort of young women who are only facetiously referred to as ladies? And why should a cabinet-sized portrait of the Honorable Ermentine be found in such less than dubious company? Lastly, what was contained within this box of mysterious powder that had a picture of a horse crudely limned on the cover?

Already, the rooms of the other guests; and those of all the household but Ermentine's, had been searched. Mrs. Swiveltree's had yielded a large bill from her milliner, a still larger one from her dressmaker, a picture of her husband looking stern and relentless, another of a foreign-looking gentleman with a pencil-thin mustache and a languorous eye, this latter inscribed with words in a foreign tongue that had caused the searcher's eyebrows to rise in sardonic amusement. There was also a box of a mysterious powder

in a pale pink color, delicately scented and enigmatically labeled "Coty."

Madame Vigée-Lenoir's room had contained, aside from the expected feminine fripperies, certain articles of interest to the inscrutable searcher. Notable among these were dunning letters in French from her *modiste*, her *coiffeuse*, and her *boulangère*; a cachet of some mysterious powder labeled "For Teething Infants," and one glorious pendant earring of blazing rubies and sparkling brilliants, along with a note which, translated from the French, read simply but meaningfully, "You know what you must do to get its mate."

The late Silas Whipsnade's luggage, as might have been expected from His Lordship's recent revelation, contained an identification card from the Eye-Spye Detective Agency, made out, however, in the name of Silas Whipsnade rather than Augustus Fox. It would appear that the detective was determined to preserve his alias at any cost. There was a letter from Lord Ditherby-Stoat engaging the detective to come to Haverings on the weekend of the house party, and enclosing a personal check for a sum that sent the eyebrows soaring again. The *soi-disant* Whipsnade had used the letter for certain private jottings, scribbling Hellespont's name with a large question mark after it, and Madame Vigée-Lenoir's under a caricature that can best be described as rude. He had even added a whimsical bar sinister to the family crest engraved on the letterhead. Other than those vagaries and a box of a mysterious gray powder labeled "For Fingerprints," the luggage carried nothing of interest.

Gleanings from the mean apartment of Miss Twiddle were more surprising. Drab and mousy though her outer garments might be, it transpired that the companion possessed unmentionables of flaming scarlet. Cunningly disguised in plain brown paper jackets was a whole row of sensational novels. The searcher had not been able to suppress a low whistle as he scanned the torrid pages of Ouida and the passionate outpourings of Mrs. Aphra Behn. He had also taken a cautious sniff at a small bundle of mysterious packets of a white powder labeled "To be taken with meals."

A hasty trip from that secret haven of romantic rodomontade to Figgletton's basement room was a study in contrasts. Aside from his pantry book and the daily newspaper, the late butler's reading matter appeared to have been confined to the *Peerage*; and his correctly butlerian wardrobe to have contained but one incongruous item: namely, a baby's diaper embroidered with the crest

of the family he had so loyally served: a Stoat Rampant on a Field Vert. His well-polished shoes had recently been fitted with patent arch supports, and his collar box contained not only the expected neckware but also a small box of a mysterious powder bearing the inscription, "Pep-U-Uppo (Patent Applied For)."

Gerald Potherton's room had contained little of interest save several fruitless attempts to pen an ode to his "lost love," a somewhat surprising theme considering Ermentine's obvious though possibly temporary attachment, a dunning letter from his tailor couched in terms far from poetic, a lurid spy novel, and a tin of a mysterious powder represented as "Mustache Strengtheners."

Lord Ditherby-Stoat's sumptuous quarters were hardly more fruitful. Aside from the empty dispatch box and the copy of *Leaves from a Journal of Our Life in the Highlands*, there were only such accoutrements as might have been expected: a signed portrait of Her Gracious Majesty in a heavy silver frame, another of Lady Ditherby-Stoat in her Presentation gown, a photograph of Lord Ditherby-Stoat himself in full dress with orders, standing beside a bust of his great ancestor, a baby's diaper embroidered with the Ditherby-Stoat coat of arms, and a phial of a mysterious substance labeled "Rhinoceros Horn," no doubt the gift of some foreign emissary.

Lady Ditherby-Stoat had not been spared in this relentless search, and some surprises had eventuated. Little would her acquaintances have divined the vein of sentiment that ran behind that "icily regular, splendidly null" facade. Hidden beneath the scented padding in her hosiery drawer were an unsigned lace valentine, a faded rose, and a much-creased note bearing the poignant words, "Although you can never be mine, I shall cherish you in my heart forever," and signed with the single initial, "P," these precious tokens all folded inside the sheet music of Tosti's touching ballad, "Goodbye." Beside them lay a packet of a mysterious powder marked "For the Nerves."

The Honorable Ermentine's boudoir, last on the searcher's list, revealed all the froufrous and whimsies to be expected of a pleasure-loving young lady. There was a box of bonbons, half its sugary contents devoured. There was a veritable snowstorm of dance cards, on which the names of Gerald Potherton and A. Lysander Hellespont appeared frequently. More surprisingly, on the topmost card, Count Bratvuschenko had written himself down for a *galop*. And shuffled in among the heap, as if to conceal it from the eyes of her maid or possibly her mother, was an unsigned note on lilac-colored

paper bearing the perhaps teasing, perhaps ominous words, "I know your secret."

Also attracting the searcher's notice was an ornate crystal jar full of some mysterious scented substance labeled, enigmatically, "Bath Salts." He was turning this bit of evidence over in his strong, well-shaped hands when, as chance would have it, the Honorable Ermentine flew into the room on the urgent mission of tucking up a stray ringlet. Catching sight of the intruder, she stopped short, her eyes blazing fearlessly.

"What," she demanded imperiously, "are you doing with my bath salts?"

"I am doing this."

The tall man snatched up a delicate porcelain pin tray, ruthlessly dumped its contents on the dressing table, sending hatpins and glove stretchers in every direction, then spilled out the bath salts into the tray. Picking up an ivory-handled buttonhook, he then stirred the crystalline mass, wafting a fragrance as of violets throughout the chamber. In horrified fascination, Ermentine watched. Then she gasped.

"What is that?"

Her quivering finger pointed to a small glass ampoule that now glistered atop the heap of bath salts.

"Well may you ask," said the unknown in portentous tone. "Unless I am mistaken, which I must say has never happened thus far, this little ampoule contains at least one more lethal dose of the unknown Asiatic poison by means of which the late Silas Whipnade was so recently and efficaciously done to death under our very eyes."

"Then don't tell me who did it. If you dropped dead in the midst of doing so, like Mr. Whipnade, I should never be able to explain to Mama how a strange man's corpse got into my bedroom."

She was to have trouble enough explaining the presence of a live one, judging from the expression on her mother's face as Lady Ditherby-Stoat entered the room, followed by the rest of the party.

"Ermentine, who is this person?"

"I have not yet got round to asking him his name, Mama," replied the minx. "I found him-fishing an unknown poison out of my bath salts."

"Confound you, villain!" cried Gerald Potherton, springing to the fore with his fists at the ready for a knockdown blow. "How dare you attempt to defame the name of a lady?"

"Nothing was further from my mind, I assure you," replied the

stranger. "I am but attempting to defend my own."

With a low bow, he proffered an engraved calling card, which Potherton could not but read.

"Augustus Fox, forsooth! Ruffian, you are making sport of me. Augustus Fox lies a stiffening corpse in the—Army dearest, would you happen to recall what the footman did with Mr. Whipsnade?"

"Mr. Whipsnade is in the butler's pantry with the late Percival Figgletton," Fox informed His Lordship. "Though this was not the first time he has taken my name in vain, Whipsnade was in fact none other than himself, an insignificant employee of a third-rate detective agency. His only genuine ability lay in his adroitness at aiding unscrupulous persons in their fell designs and blackmailing them when their perfidies had been accomplished."

"What perfidies?" demanded the Honorable Ermentine.

"Any perfidies," Fox replied with a tolerant smile. "Let us suppose, for instance, that an unlucky gambler determined upon doping the Derby favorite but needed help in obtaining the requisite potion. Or a cocaine smuggler wished to expand her already thriving market. Or the young wife of an elderly tycoon had fallen in love with a handsome adventurer and required a means of rendering the old man unconscious so that she could join her paramour in the happy task of turning her gems to paste so that he and she would have a tidy nestegg with which to elope."

He shrugged. "But this is mere speculation. And so, I fear, is the question of what prompted Whipsnade's impromptu funeral oration. Did such scruples as he might still possess prompt his attempted denouncement of a crime too heinous even for him to stomach? Was it rather part of a subtle ruse devised between himself and his final employer? Or was he endeavoring to make a public example of his latest victim in order to stimulate the payment of danegeld from the others? We may never know. May I suggest that we descend to the drawing room before we attack the problem of who concealed the poison capsule in Miss Ermentine's bath salts? I quite agree with Mr. Potherton as to the unsuitability of polluting these chaste walls with further sordid revelations."

With one accord, they made for the staircase, Fox stooping to retrieve the delicately perfumed lace handkerchief which Madame Vigée-Lenoir dropped at his feet, and restoring it to her with a gentlemanly gesture that yet made plain he was not the man to be trapped by so transparent a ruse.

When all were reassembled in the majestic salon, Fox indicated

that he was ready to resume his narrative, though not before the Honorable Ermentine had observed, "I never knew Figgletton's given name was Percival."

"Ah," said Fox, whom the aside had naturally not escaped. "But therein lies the gist, or nub, of my tale. Miss Twiddle, you are, are you not, the sister of the late Percival Figgletton?"

As though by necromantic means, the drabness and mousiness disappeared. An inch of scarlet petticoat showed beneath the drooping gray hem as Miss Twiddle drew herself up proudly. "I am."

"Then you must know what weighty secret it was that your brother carried for lo, these many years."

"Figgletton carried lots of secrets," Lord Ditherby-Stoat interrupted peevishly. "I trusted him, damme."

"And worthily did he uphold that trust," said Lady Ditherby-Stoat most unexpectedly.

"Percival could do no other," cried Miss Twiddle. "Ne'er drew he an ignoble breath."

"What does she mean, ne'er drew he?" Gerald muttered to Ermentine.

"I don't know. I think it's poetry." For once, that ebullient young woman was sober, gazing at Miss Twiddle's scarlet petticoat as if gripped by some force she could not understand.

"Trustworthy is an adjective that cannot be applied to at least one other person in this room." Fox's keen, penetrating eyes traveled among the assemblage, resting first on Madame Vigée-Lenoir, then on Hellespont, and lastly on Mrs. Swiveltree. "To get at the root of this matter, we must ask ourselves who benefits most from the theft of the plans for the Beard-Wynnington Dirigible Airship? Or, as we used to say at Harrow, *cui bono*?"

"Mrs. Swiveltree," said Ermentine promptly. "Mr. Swiveltree will be so pleased they're gone that he'll pay her dressmaker's bills without a murmur."

"I should be rather inclined to vote for Madame Vigée-Lenoir," drawled A. Lysander Hellespont. "I fancy a certain cabinet minister in a certain country not more than a channel's swim from here will do rather more than pay her dressmaker's bills."

"And I, on ze ozzer hand, wondaire how zese plans may affect ze plans of Monsieur Hellespont's bookmakaire," retorted the Frenchwoman viciously.

"Those are all points to consider," said Fox blandly. "And now let us ask ourselves who benefits the least."



"*Cui malo*," interjected Gerald Potherton, much to Ermentine's admiration.

"The *malo* is mine, naturally," said Lord Ditherby-Stoat. "Unless those plans are recovered, I am a ruined man."

"However, my brother is in any case a dead man," rejoined Miss Twiddle sharply.

"My dear," Lord Ditherby-Stoat turned to his wife, "might you not drop a hint to Twiddle that she oversteps herself?"

"She does not," replied Lady Ditherby-Stoat. "Her logic is irrefutable."

"There is also the matter of the defunct Silas Whipsnade," Fox went on, "although strictly speaking it was not the loss of the plans that hastened his demise."

"Then what was it?" demanded Ermentine.

"It was his rapacious greed," the famous detective responded. "You see, Whipsnade had ferreted out that weighty secret which the late Percival Figgleton and the discreet Miss Twiddle had guarded so jealously for so many years. He planned not to guard it, but to exploit it to the hilt."

"You mean more blackmail?" said Hellespont.

"I do."

"How dastardly!"

"And how dangerous. Whipsnade reckoned not with the primitive ferocity that lies beneath his intended victim's suavely correct facade."

All eyes turned toward Hellespont.

"Don't look at me," he drawled, essaying a light laugh. "I'm not all that correct."

"Then it was Count Bratvuschenko," exclaimed Mrs. Swiveltree, who appeared not yet to have grasped the import of those grotesque habiliments so recently discovered in the vanished guest's bedroom. "One sensed the primitive ferocity merely from the way he attacked his soup. But where is he now?"

"If you will wait one moment, I shall bring him to you."

Fox wheeled and ran lightly up the majestic staircase. In little more than the promised moment, the bearlike Bratvuschenko was back among them, glowering around in search of the brandy decanter.

"And now," cried a merry voice, "I shall make him disappear again."

With an airy gesture, the brown wig was lifted, the bushy beard

detached. Behold, Augustus Fox stood before them!

"When I learned through dark and devious sources," he explained, "that Silas Whipsnade was up to his old tricks at Havering, I determined to safeguard my own unblemished reputation and foil his evil scheme by being on hand myself to ferret out whatever miching mallecho had brought him here. The true Count Bratvuschenko, who I may say owed me a little service for reasons I am not free to divulge, was only too happy to have me take his place while he remained in his secluded country seat poring over his chessboard and making notes for the novel he plans some day to write. I foxed you all, did I not?"

"He is a veritable master of disguise," ejaculated Gerald Potherton, in whom clear signs of dawning hero-worship were now discernible.

"If the ladies will forgive me," said Fox, "I shall also divest myself of this somewhat uncomfortable padded waistcoat. It spoils the drape of one's coat. As does a bulky sheaf of papers, such as the plans for the Beaird-Wynnington Dirigible Airship. May I relieve you of them; Lord Ditherby-Stoat?"

Before anyone could make a move, the plans were in the hands of Augustus Fox: Amid the startled cries of all, he calmly tucked them inside his own impeccably tailored garment.

"I have a hansom cab waiting. Within the hour, I shall have hied myself straight to Buck House and placed these documents in Her Majesty's own hands. As for you, Lord Ditherby-Stoat, I fear the *cui malo* you thought to avoid by your stratagem has caught up with you. When you staged a cunning robbery as a pretext to drive your gold-mounted dagger into the most loyal heart that ever beat, even as Figgleton was in the act of informing you that the plans were gone, you sealed your own fate."

"How so?" cried Hellespont.

"For one thing," replied Fox, "the hilt of the dagger bore His Lordship's own monogram. No such slip would have occurred, of course, had you been able to rely on your accustomed guide and mentor, Lord Ditherby-Stoat. Few persons realized that the brain behind the Beaird-Wynnington coup, and indeed behind all your brilliant acts of statesmanship, was that of your late nephew, the alleged Percival Figgleton, who was in fact the true Lord Ditherby-Stoat."

"Good heavens, Honoria," drawled Mrs. Swiveltree. "You married the wrong Ditherby-Stoat."

"Oh no," replied Lady Ditherby-Stoat, with her usual calm aplomb. "I married the right one. No doubt Mr. Fox will be able to explain."

"I believe so," said the great detective. "The original contretemps arose from the fact that the late Cedric Ditherby-Stoat, eldest son of the then Lord Ditherby-Stoat, was killed in the hunting field at the age of thirty-one, supposedly unmarried although not without issue. In fact, Cedric had been united in lawful wedlock seven years previously with the daughter of a publican in a neighboring village, by whom he had a son and a daughter, both of them quite legitimate but not recognized as such by Cedric's parents because of their mother's lowly origin. Upon Cedric's death, therefore, the succession passed not to his son Percival, the rightful heir, but to Cedric's younger brother, the present Lord Ditherby-Stoat. I may say in exculpation that I believe the present Lord Ditherby-Stoat to have been kept in ignorance of his nephew's legitimacy until he was apprised of the truth by the late Silas Whipsnade not long since."

"Bloody beggar wanted five hundred thousand pounds to hush it up," whined Lord Ditherby-Stoat, from whom the mien of rank and dignity seemed already to be falling.

"To continue my painful narrative," Fox went on, "the true Lord Ditherby-Stoat, though fully aware of his rights, was astute enough to realize he had no real hope of succeeding to the position that should have been his. However, the blood of the Ditherby-Stoats ran high in his veins. Rather than bring scandal upon the family by forcing himself, the grandson of a publican, into the public eye as the rightful claimant, he took the nobler course of dedicating himself to its service. Using a false name, he engaged himself to the household as boot boy and worked his way steadily up through the ranks until his obviously superior qualifications earned him, young as he was, the exalted position of butler and confidant to his false Lordship. Inspired by her brother's example and aided by his increasing influence with the family, Percival's younger sister also anonymously obtained a post here, as companion to that elderly dowager whose malign influence over her sons had been a primary factor in preventing Cedric from securing the rights of his own legitimate offspring. Entitled though she is to the dignity of a family member, she has meekly and dutifully endured the scorn and ignominy of a paid companion. Miss Twiddle; I salute you."

"How did you fathom my secret?" gasped the erstwhile drab and mousy underling.

"Elementary, my dear Miss Ditherby-Stoat, for thus I must henceforth style you. I noted the tearstains on your well-worn copy of *Oroonoko, or the Royal Slave*. Immediately, all was clear to me."

It was clear to A. Lysander Hellespont, too. A new light dawning in his eyes, he bent low over Miss Ditherby-Stoat's formerly careworn hand.

"But there is more," said Fox. "Shall I go on, Lady Ditherby-Stoat?"

"You must, must you not?"

"Yes, I must. I believe the next chapter in our saga must have taken place when Lady Honoria, fourth daughter of the Earl of Cantilever, already betrothed to Lord Ditherby-Stoat, visited Haverings with her parents and the *soi-disant* Figgletton announced their arrival."

"We exchanged but one glance," said Lady Ditherby-Stoat in a gentle, wistful tone nobody had ever heard her use before, "and we knew. Later, under pretense of visiting the ladies' cloakroom, I tiptoed down to the butler's pantry. There I learned that Figgletton was the true Lord Ditherby-Stoat. There we plighted our troth. There we planned what was clearly the only thing to be done. The following day, under pretext of visiting my old nanny, I slipped away to a tiny church in an unfashionable street and married my darling Percival."

"And after that you had the gall to marry me?" cried Lord Ditherby-Stoat.

"Ours has been no true marriage. You went through the ceremony under a false title and false pretensions. And I kept my fingers crossed as I said my vows."

"And you had a terrible headache on the wedding night," Ditherby-Stoat added bitterly. "And you've had one ever since. I've always wondered how we managed to come up with Ermentine."

"You had nothing to do with Ermentine's birth. She is the legitimate daughter of my beloved late husband, Percival Ditherby-Stoat. As such, she is now also the true heiress to Haverings."

"Then where does that leave me? Honoria, what shall I do?"

"Obviously, Edmund, there is only one thing for you to do." She opened her evening bag and handed him a small, pearl-handled revolver such as might properly be carried by the fourth daughter of any nobleman. "I suggest the library, and you might take a footman with you this time. One does get so weary of ringing bells."

FICTION

# Hit and Run

by Steve Lindley



Illustration by Nick Jainschigg

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“Dead, huh.” Charly Kinnelman wedged the phone receiver against his ear with his shoulder while one hand played with a cigarette butt and the other scratched at his grease- and paint-covered ankle. He was looking out the station window past the gas pumps at the empty stretch of Kentucky highway, but he was seeing Jeanne Tuttle’s face.

“No,” he said into the phone. “I saw Mrs. Tuttle last night at the hospital, and she didn’t sound too hopeful about Jeanne’s chances. It was about two A.M., I guess. Well, I went out with Jeanne a couple of times about a year ago, you know. I’m sick. It makes me sick just thinking about it. That damned Bodee Road is so dark at night, and with all the crazies we get driving around here now, you’d think they really ought to put up some kind of—” Charly listened to the sheriff on the other end for a moment while he ran his hand through his hair, unwittingly transferring grease there from his ankle.

“And it’s still all you know, that the car that hit her was red? Well, no, I just mean that just about every other truck in this county is fire engine red, so it just seems—no, sir, you know my green Rambler. Al-

ways been green, always will be green. Besides, it ain’t even been running the last couple of days. Been up on the lift. I got it there now. Transmission. No, I know you got to check everybody—I been here a couple of hours now and I haven’t seen anybody. And you know if they come out on this road, they always stop here and gas up. Yes, sir, if I do, I’ll call you. No sir, I won’t do anything stupid. I’ll wait till they leave.”

Charly took the receiver in his right hand, rubbed his forehead with his left, and stared back at the empty road. “Yes, sir. Look, I gotta go. I got a customer. I’ll let you know.” He hung up and rested his face in his hands, but with his eyes closed the image of Jeanne’s face was even more vivid, so he kicked the station’s screen door open and went outside, let the low morning sun burn her image out of his eyes.

Damn that Jeanne Tuttle, anyway. It was just like her to decide to walk home from work along a dark road on a moonless night. Charly had liked Jeanne. Everybody liked Jeanne. She was one of those girls who needed to be looked after. Walking-accident-Jeanne, the kind of girl who always wore her breakfast on her dress, who always seemed to have one limb



or another in a cast. Band-aid Jeanne.

Dead Jeanne, now. Poor, dead Jeanne. Finally caught up with her. The whole thing made Charly's gut ache. He went over to the soda machine to cool it with a Sprite. His dog, penned in the back, heard his footsteps and started to bark. Charly fished a penny out of his pocket and threw it at the fence to shut him up. He was fishing for more change when he heard the familiar sound of distant tires swishing along blacktop. Charly turned around and watched the fire engine red Pontiac slow down, almost hesitate a moment, then pull into the station. It stopped beside the far pump, just far enough along that the stack of worn Michelins hid the dented front fender from Charly's sight.

Charly didn't move for a second, just stared at the battered side of the '63 Pontiac. He took a step back toward the screen door, then thought better of it and walked slowly over to the far gas pump, swallowing hard, wishing he had had the chance to drink that Sprite.

**B**ob Pooles, the sheriff of Calloway County, picked up the receiver to make yet another phone call, then grunted and let it drop back into its cradle. He

wanted to lay his head down on his desk and let his brain recharge, but the corned beef sandwich he had eaten for breakfast felt as if it was about to come back up and he didn't want to take any chances.

Damn that Jeanne Tuttle, anyway. She had always been a problem, getting not only herself but half the young boys in the vicinity in trouble, losing one job after another, holding a one-woman crusade to drive every insurance company within a hundred miles out of business.

Calloway had been a quiet county once. That was when Pooles was young, had just joined the police force and was hot, looking for action. Now here he was, just looking for a little peace and quiet, and the action never seemed to stop. And ever since the state police made that series of drug busts along I-24, he had been seeing some strange faces on the side roads that ran through his territory. Now the state police were on his case, wondering why his arrest record was so low. He had even received a note from the governor asking him to beef up his enforcement. It wasn't an especially nasty letter, but it wasn't one he wanted to frame and hang on his office wall, either.

Pooles popped three Bayers



in his mouth and flushed them down his throat with lukewarm coffee. All these phone calls were probably useless anyway. The hit and run had occurred six hours ago, just after midnight. The chances were that whoever hit Jeanne was just passing through and would be long gone by now.

But Charly had been right about one thing. A whole hell of a lot of residents owned red pickups. While it was hard for Pooles to believe that any of his folks would be capable of a hit and run, it was also true that he had been accused more than once of being too lax with county residents. Of course Pooles couldn't help it if most folks in Calloway County were good people. Honest people. The type that hated crime, that complain about soft sheriffs. The type that vote them out of office.

He picked up the phone and started dialing.

**T**eddy crushed his first joint of the day out in the Pontiac's ashtray. He got out of the car, leaving the door open to clear out the smoke just in case the hick gas jockey could recognize the smell of marijuana. He squinted. He coughed. He spat. It was way too early to be conscious. His lungs hurt, his muscles were twisted all the wrong ways, and

the daylight was baking his eyeballs dry. All he wanted to do was to get the hell away from wherever he was and arrive in St. Louis five hours ago. He reached for the gas pump's handle.

"Hey." A hatless attendant in stained coveralls came around the pump and stopped. "This ain't no self-service."

Teddy stepped back, squinted at the kid, who looked like he had just waked up under a car. "Fine," he said. He put his hands in the air and stepped back, letting the kid squeeze warily by him. "You fill it up, then."

"Regular, huh," the kid said, unlatching the pump. Teddy nodded. "Don't sell too much of that any more."

Teddy didn't say anything. The kid stared back at him. Teddy was used to taking that from the people out here. They were a backwards breed. They didn't like his hair, his leather pants, his chain belt, his Grateful Dead T-shirt. They didn't like him, period. That was okay with Teddy, but this kid was getting to be more than just rude, still not moving, just holding the pump's nozzle and staring.

"Is there a problem?" Teddy asked, nervously searching his pants pockets for his cigarettes.

"Just that I need the key to

unlock your gas cap."

Teddy sighed, sat with one leg in the car, and pulled his key ring out of the ignition. Maybe this kid was just weird, but he had to start thinking clearly; he didn't need any more trouble. The trip from Miami had been one disaster after another. But for the grace of his four-barrel carburetor he would never have been able to outrun that state cop on I-24. That was as close as he had ever come. He'd had to run on the side roads after that, wasting time and killing beers. He didn't remember much after the first six pack and the fifth of Jack Daniels, but the sun woke him lost in a forgotten rest stop just down the road, feeling as if he had blown his insides out the exhaust pipe.

Now here he was, five hours late for his connection in St. Louis, with twenty-five pounds of pot in the trunk and an unregistered handgun in the glove compartment which he had been forced to use in Miami and didn't like carrying anyway. This was no time to start arguing with an inbred gas jockey.

Getting out of the car, his foot caught an empty beer can and kicked it out onto the pavement. He and the kid both watched it roll forever, turning inside circles and rocking back into more circles. When it fi-

nally stopped rolling, the kid stared back up at Teddy.

"You got a garbage can around here?"

"There's a dumpster around the side by the bathrooms," the kid answered, pointing.

Teddy handed him the keys, noticing for the first time that the kid seemed a little nervous himself, which made him feel a little better, then gathered up as many empty beer cans as he could find under the car seats. He left the Jack Daniels bottle on the floor, since it was still a quarter full, resisted an urge to take a hit off it, and went around the side of the gas station. A radio was going inside the shack. He recognized the unusually high twangy voice of the disc jockey as the same one he had been playing in his car, probably the only radio station they could get around here. He must have found it on the dial last night. God, how long had he been driving around lost in this area?

Charly waited until the car's owner had gone around the side of the garage, then left the hose to pump gas automatically and went around to the front of the car to examine the fender. Charly had been pounding out dents since Mr. Snyder had given him his job at the gas station when he was fourteen. He knew what to look for. He ran

his fingers along the smashed bumper. No rust. The hood hadn't been dented, but the parking light was busted, the chrome around it jagged.

He stood up and stepped back. It could have been a tree that did it, could have been a large dog. But there was no way of telling. It just might have been the body of a young girl out on Bodee Road last night.

The Doberman's barking behind the station brought him back to attention. He took one last look at the dent, tried to shake the image of Jeanne Tuttle's face out of his head so he could think clearly, and popped the hood.

The radio had been playing the news. It was vaguely familiar to Teddy. The DJ mentioned a girl's name, a girl who was dead. Teddy missed the name, but he was sure he had heard it before. He listened again for it. He didn't hear the Doberman padding up behind him on the other side of the chain link fence. He hadn't even noticed the fence until the dog hit it hard with its front paws. The fence bowed, hitting Teddy in the back. He jumped forward, dropped the empty beer cans at his feet, and spun around.

On its hind legs, the dog was just taller than the fence, about a foot shorter than Teddy. It

barked just long enough so that Teddy backed against the shack, then settled into a growl, its teeth bared. Its saliva dripped down onto the fence. Teddy backed away and the dog started barking again, pacing back and forth as far as the small pen would allow it.

Teddy had never trusted dogs. Even in the city where they prance on a leash and sleep next to babies on soft rugs, he took the trouble to step away from them. Out here, penned in like a zoo animal, the damned thing scared the hell out of him. He left the beer cans on the ground and determined to get out of there and back to St. Louis as soon as possible. This trip had been just one long disaster.

When he came back around the corner, the pump had stopped at eleven dollars and forty cents and the gas jockey was checking the oil. Teddy stopped and waited for him to say something, but nothing came. He looked up and down the dead road that ran so near beside him, wondering what highway it was and wishing he was on it.

"Met your dog," he said to the attendant.

"Nice dog."

"Sure. Nice."

"Keeps an eye on the place," the kid said, straightening up.

"Almost a quart down." The kid showed him the filthy dipstick. "Want some oil?"

"It's okay," Teddy said, trying to light a cigarette. The dog had given him the shakes. "Skip it."

"Suit yourself," the kid said. "But you're just getting started and you got a ways to go before you get to the next station."

Teddy blew out smoke. "What do you mean just getting started?"

"I mean you just started driving and you're already a quart low. I figure you must have stayed in Hardin last night."

Teddy watched the kid shove the dipstick back into the oil pan. Now what the hell was this all about? "What makes you think that? Maybe I've been driving all night."

The kid pulled the cap off the radiator and held it up in front of Teddy's face. "Engine's not hot enough. You stay in Hardin last night? Only one motel, but it's nice. Holiday Inn."

A moment of quiet triumph for the hick. It was something to see, a real tourist attraction.

"No," Teddy said. "I slept in my car last night. Right down the road. Is that okay with you? I don't like Holiday Inns."

"It's fine with me." The kid shrugged, but he still looked anxious. It was a very warm morning. The armpits of Teddy's shirt were wet. "I'm just saying you're a quart down and you got

a way to go. Besides that, this front tire here is worn pretty badly. You want me to check your spare?"

Five white Hefty bags bulging with green stems flashed in front of Teddy's eyes like a supernova.

"No. The spare's fine. I just checked it myself. It's fine."

"Suit yourself." The kid slammed down the hood.

"Where is the next station, anyway?"

"There was one in Brewers, but that closed up last winter. Next one is just outside Mayfield. You were heading west, weren't you?"

Teddy wasn't certain and he'd just realized he wasn't certain. "You sell maps here?"

"All out of maps. Sorry." The kid ran his hand along the Pontiac's front fender. "Nice dent you got here. Didn't hit one of our deer, did you?"

"No. Why? Is there a law against it?" A name was jumbling around in the fog of Teddy's brain. It was a woman's name, but he couldn't place it. He was too hung over and confused, frightened by that damned dog. He was out of his element. A punk like this wouldn't get far playing with him in Miami. Come visit me in Florida sometime, kid, he thought. Take a trip to Disney World; I'll find you and then God help you.

"No law. It's just that we got a lot of them this year, all over the roads. I nearly hit one myself last weekend."

Jeanne Tuttle. That was the name, the girl on the news. It was a wonder Teddy had been able to pull it out of his head over all the kid's gibberish. He re-ran the news story through his head. Hit. That was why he had thought of her name. Hit and run.

"Whatcha hit?"

The kid wasn't looking at him, thank God. They were both staring at the car's dented grillwork. Teddy wiped the sweat off his forehead with the palm of his hand, transferred it to his pants leg. He couldn't remember what he had hit. This car was full of dents. He had bought it full of dents and added to them whenever anything got in his way, especially at night, especially with a few beers in him. No, Teddy had no memory of what he had hit.

"What do I owe you?"

The pump still said eleven forty. The kid said it out loud. Teddy handed him a twenty and the kid went back into the station for change, but not before hesitating a moment the way a bellhop hesitates after you put a cheap tip in his palm. Then Teddy was left alone with the dent.

Charly let the screen door slam behind him, sidestepped

out of sight, and leaned against the wall. So far so good. There was no longer any doubt in his mind. This was the man. But where did he go from here? He thought of what Sheriff Pooles had told him, to stay out of trouble, get the license number, and let the man pass on. Damn that Jeanne Tuttle, anyway. It was her fault that he was in this situation in the first place.

Charly shoved the phone out of his way and peered around the motor oil display in the front window. The man outside looked lost. He was looking up the road, back at his car, back at the road. He turned toward the shack and Charly pulled away from the window. When he looked back out, the man was getting in his car. Charly couldn't help but smile. He patted his coverall pocket, making the man's key ring jingle. Then he waited.

The man was in the car a long time. Charly watched him pull up the bottle of Jack Daniels and drink from it once, then again. Charly would have liked some of that. Hell, he still wanted that Sprite. Then the man leaned over and played with the glove compartment. When he got back out of the car, he had something in his right hand that Charly hadn't counted on.

Charly moved away from the window and stood in the middle

of the room. Old Mr. Snyder kept no gun here, claimed they never needed one. Well, now Charly needed one. He took a quick look around the shack at the oil cans, antifreeze, gas additives, light bulbs, junk. He thought of the tool chest in the garage, the torque wrench which could do a lot of damage to a man's head, but which he could never get close enough to use. Then he thought of the side door to the garage. He didn't move for a moment, tried to judge his time, then went for it.

Teddy wiped his hair off his forehead as he walked slowly toward the shack. He had one arm behind him, his hand holding the gun tucked in his back pocket. He felt good, and it wasn't just because of the gun. He had read the hick and now he knew what he was up against. Now Teddy could deal with the situation.

The bourbon had helped clear his head. No gas jockey had to go inside to a cash register to make change. They kept their money in their pockets. Just like bellhops. The kid had been testing him all along. A real Lone Ranger, he must have figured Teddy had run down that Tuttle hick. Well, what if he did? Damn her, anyway. Only a moron walks in front of a moving car. He was sure he hadn't meant to do it, couldn't

even remember doing it. It obviously wasn't his fault.

And now the kid had his keys. That was too bad for the kid.

Teddy stretched out his free arm to open the screen door. He opened it slowly. It didn't creak. Holding it open with his back, he entered the room sideways. The shack was empty. That made him nervous. If the kid had made a phone call and run off with his keys, he was screwed. He let the door close silently with his foot, keeping his eyes on the open doorway that led to the garage. There was no movement outside the shack. If the kid was in the garage, things would be all right.

The gun was out of his pocket now. No more games. He kept it pointed in front of him as he crept through the doorway, turned, and aimed.

The kid was in the garage. He was sitting on a tool chest against the back wall between a green Rambler six feet off the ground on a hoist and a red tow truck backed against the far wall. Teddy's eyes automatically found the kid's hands. They were empty, resting on his knees. Teddy's keys were lying on the stained floor two feet in front of the kid. It was a strange little tableau, as alien to Teddy as anything else he had run across in this section

of the country. The kid just stared at him. He almost looked sad.

There was a noise outside, that familiar sound of tires swishing on blacktop, a car or truck pulling into the station. The kid heard it, too, and strangely enough, it caused an expression to form on his face which must have matched Teddy's own: an interruption, an unwelcome intruder. Danger. Time had run out. Teddy had to take the kid out now and take his chances with whoever was outside. He gripped the gun in both hands. The muscles in his arms tensed. But the expression on the kid's face didn't change. All he did was let out a quick, sharp whistle through his front teeth.

Teddy didn't hear the Doberman padding up behind him until just before it leaped. He had time only to turn his head and expose his soft throat to the dog's teeth. He was knocked down on his back, managed to squeeze out one wild shot into the Rambler's oil pan. He never heard the second shot. He just slipped into the dark end of a trip which had been one long disaster.

**S**heriff Pooles handed a spray gun to one of his younger officers who, in turn, handed him a

Sprite from the soda machine. He took a sip from it, felt guilty at the refreshment it gave him. He stepped out of the doorway to make room for the men who were carrying Teddy out in a zippered bag, then went into the shack.

Charly was sitting at the desk. He had been sitting there for the last hour and hadn't said a word to the officer stationed there with him.

"Sorry I had to shoot the dog," Pooles said to Charly. "If I had known the guy was already dead, I wouldn't have done it. I could have just pulled him off."

"It's okay. I understand."

"I mean, it wasn't his fault. He didn't know any better."

"It's okay."

The sheriff offered the Sprite to Charly, who refused it. Pooles walked over to the wall calendar. The girl's picture on it distracted him for a moment. He continued speaking, still staring at it.

"What brought me over here was what you said. Not about all the red trucks in the county, but about your car. You said you'd had it on the hoist for the last couple of days. I saw it in there. You did. Needs a little more work now with that bullet in it. But, Charly, you had to have some other way of getting to work and back, to get to the



hospital last night. You're a single guy. You only got one car. So why wouldn't you have just told me about what kind of car you were driving the night Jeanne was hit, the night I was asking you about? Then I thought of what vehicle you might have been using. You work in a garage. I called Snyder. He told me he had been letting you use the tow truck. The red one." He waited for Charly to respond, but he didn't.

"It wasn't your Rambler you been working on all day in the garage. George is taking the spray gun and paint down to the station. I know you already sanded down the truck's fender, but I got to impound it anyway just in case there are any traces. . . . Hate to do that to Snyder. I don't suppose you saved anything to scrape onto this other fellow's—"

Pooles' stomach gave him another pang. Charly gave him a look that made him turn back to the calendar.

"Anyway, you picked a pretty good pigeon. You wouldn't believe what we found in that guy's trunk. If I hadn't come along—"

"It's okay."

That was enough. Pooles left Charly to the officer's care and went outside. He had work to do. There were a lot of phone calls to be made. He had no business trying to kid glove a young fellow he had known all his life.

Jeanne Tuttle was a jinx, all right. It doesn't take much to turn an accident into a crime. Now there were two deaths, one in cold blood, not to mention a trunk full of marijuana, all processed through Pooles' office, the biggest bust of his life. So much for the state police. The next letter from the governor might just get a frame around it.

That would be fine. It was all just fine.

Damn that Charly Kinnelman, anyway.

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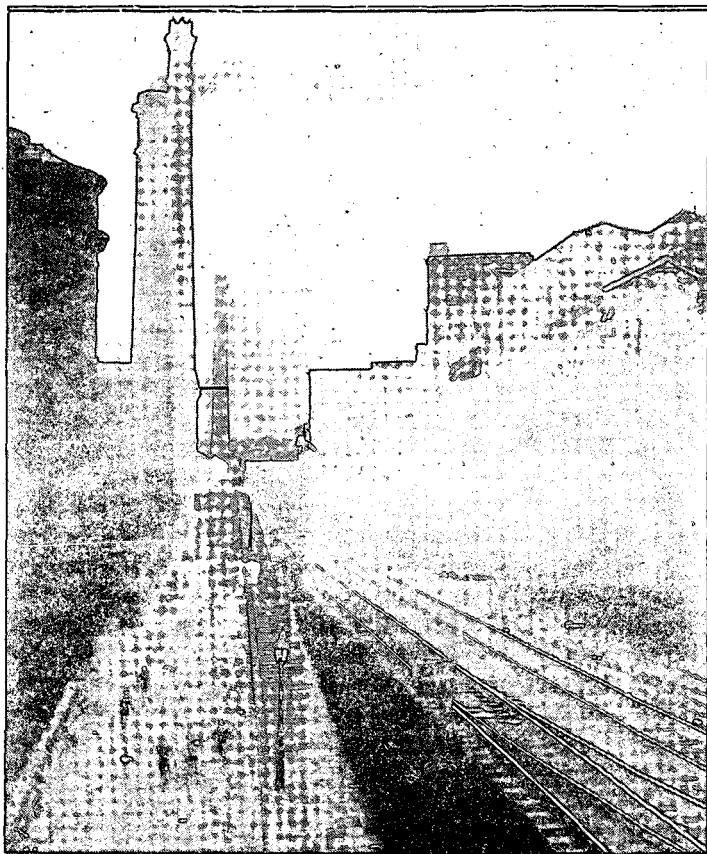
(continued from page 3)

themselves entangled in an international political conflict.

The next Mystfest will include an extensive retrospective of films made from the

writings of Cornell Woolrich, all—says Felice Laudadio—"in a cauldron bubbling with entertaining, interesting, palatable and, hopefully, intelligent mysteries."

# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

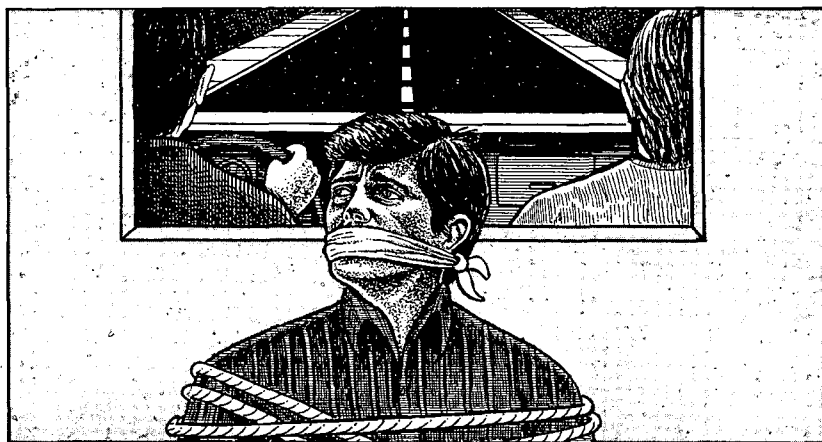


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Catch me if you can? . . . We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the October Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

# Flink



by David Braly

**T**om Jardine tugged at his tie while the man in front of him opened the heavy steel door. Jardine couldn't believe that the man was whistling, but he was.

The man pushed open the door and stepped aside for Jardine. Jardine entered and smelled the odor of death. He'd noticed it even before he'd stepped from the room, where the temperature was above eighty, into the refrigerated chamber where it was kept at thirty-eight. The man followed

Jardine inside, then shut the door behind them.

Jardine followed the man through the chamber. It was big, long, rectangular, clean, and cold. And it stank of death.

They proceeded past rows of small, numbered doors, each one about a meter wide. The man finally stopped, nodded at door 92, and said, "This is it."

Jardine nodded. The man grabbed the door's small handle, yanked hard, and a long steel slab slid out with a man's body upon it. The sliding noise

put Jardine's teeth on edge, and it stopped with a bang that echoed through the cold chamber.

Jardine forced himself to walk up to the slab. The corpse's eyes hadn't been closed; they stared coldly at him.

It didn't matter.

A new type of uneasiness absorbed Jardine. He no longer smelled the death or felt the cold. The facial features barely distinguishable on the badly decomposed body riveted his attention totally.

This was going to cause big trouble in Washington.

“I suppose you want answers,” Herb Rogers told Chet Ordway.

Rogers was seated in his morocco leather swivel chair behind his heavy black-locust desk. Chet sat in the leather armchair across from him. The office was one of the spacious, modern, bright chambers typical of offices in the CIA headquarters building in Langley.

“Many answers,” said Chet.

Rogers settled back in his chair. He grabbed a pack of Camels off the desk, offered a cigarette to Chet, who refused, and lit one with his lighter. He stared at the cigarette, held between the fingers of his left hand that rested on the desk. The smoke rose in a thin grey

thread. “Flink,” he said.

“Uh, what?”

“Have you ever heard that word? ‘Flink.’” Rogers looked up at him. “Never heard your father use it?”

“No.”

“I’d hoped you might have. It’s a word smugglers used in olden times. A ‘flink’ was a warning light shown when excisemen or soldiers approached. Sam told me just before he flew to Florida that an operation down there called Flink might have gone bad. He didn’t elaborate.”

“He was working on this. project when he was murdered?”

Rogers nodded, then drew on his cigarette.

“What was it?” asked Chet. “If Dad was murdered because of it, I have a right to know . . . Or do I?”

“You have the right. Unfortunately we can’t tell you. because we don’t know ourselves.”

“What?”

Rogers leaned forward, rested his elbows on the desk. “People who worked under your father, his associates, and the director never heard of it. There was nothing about it in his files or in the computers.”

Chet stared closely at the heavy bald man who had been his father’s closest friend. “Are you saying that Flink never existed?”

"No. Only that we have no record of it. . . . At a certain rank an officer may act independently to avoid trouble for the agency. Your father had sufficient rank. He didn't have to keep records or report to anyone. It allows the agency deniability in the event of exposure. A 'blind pool' exists to fund operations such as this. Apparently Flink was such an operation."

Chet rose. He strolled to a wall map and stared at Japan. Scenes flashed through his mind of his apartment and Tokyo, the place and city he had been two days earlier.

He forced himself back into the present. "You must have *some* idea of what Flink was."

"Saunders, myself, and others kicked around a hundred theories in several rap sessions. One—an arms smuggling operation to anti-Castro operations in Cuba—sounded good. The other theories were a washout."

"He hated Castro. He never forgot the Bay of Pigs."

"The FBI is investigating, Chet. The murder, I mean. We're looking into Flink. Frankly, neither of us is getting anywhere."

"Surely you've some idea of what he did down there, whom he saw."

Rogers drew on his cigarette.

"John Palmer. Sam saw him, we know that. John says they only talked about 'old times.'"

"Who is Palmer?"

"John used to be Sam's top aide. I was surprised not to see him at the funeral this morning."

Chet had never heard of Palmer. He wondered how many aides and friends his father had had that he would never hear of. Chet had known his father strictly on a personal and family basis even after Chet himself joined the agency.

"He was fired when President Carter reduced the size of the clandestine section," Rogers was saying. "He moved to Miami. That was an early retirement for a thirty-seven-year-old, especially for an ambitious hotshot like John Palmer."

For a moment neither man spoke. Chet wanted to ask more about Palmer but knew that Rogers was unlikely to say more.

Rogers broke the silence. "We were hoping that you'd be able to tell *us* something about Flink. We knew it wouldn't be like Sam to discuss it but . . . well, we hoped. We want to learn who murdered him, and we're also concerned that other agency personnel might be in danger. We won't know that until we discover what Flink was or is."

"My interest is narrower."

There was another half min-

ute of awkward silence. Then Chet rose and shook hands with Rogers.

"Thanks for telling me what you could, Herb."

"I wish I could tell you more. We all do."

"Sure." Chet turned toward the door. "I'll see you sometime later," he said.

"Right. . . . Do you plan to clear it with Saunders?"

"Clear what?" Chet faced Rogers again. Lloyd Saunders was an assistant director. He'd been Sam Ordway's immediate superior, the only man between Ordway and the director. He was a distant superior of Chet's, with a half dozen other officials between them in rank.

"Going to Florida to hunt for Sam's murderer," said Rogers. "Never mind. I told him what you would do. He's decided to give you a week of time off for your—grief."

"One week won't—"

"In a week you're to return to our embassy station in Japan, Chet. No way out of that. And it'll be the FBI's case exclusively."

"They'd have no special reason to solve it. . . . One week then."

**A**fter a pleasant Eastern flight to Miami, Chet checked into a luxurious hotel on Le Jeune

and called John Palmer. Palmer agreed to see him the following morning. Juan Rodriguez, whom Palmer identified as another "old Company hand" purged by Carter and a friend of Chet's father, would pick him up at the hotel and take him to Palmer's house.

Rodriguez drove him to a fenced, guarded neighborhood in the suburbs. Leafy branches of elms and sycamores were thick above the narrow, twisting road, darkening it until the trees came to an end amid tall fences that surrounded rolling green lawns and massive white houses. Palmer's house was there, behind an iron-grille gate strung between two red brick gateposts seven feet tall and five feet thick. The house, reached by a long twisting private road bordered by rows of palms, was two storied, with a flat red tile roof. Its architecture was Spanish, complete with an arch-enclosed porch and tall windows shaded by pots of hanging vines and barred by black grilles. The driveway looped around a large fountain.

Chet noticed strange things about the estate. He saw that many trees had been cut down, especially close to the house. He also saw spotlights mounted above the driveway which weren't aimed at the driveway but out toward the vast lawn

and the fence that bordered the street.

Agency training told him that these oddities were security measures. He wondered whom John Palmer feared.

“I don’t know what I can tell you that I didn’t already tell Herb,” said John Palmer.

“Sam visited, we talked about old times, and I drove him back to his hotel. That was the last time I saw him.”

Palmer was an athletic-looking man dressed in a pale blue Lacoste sport shirt and white slacks. He was seated behind his desk in his house office, light falling upon him from a window so thick that it blurred what was outside. Bullet-proof.

“Didn’t he mention why he came down?” asked Chet.

“He said it was Company business. That was enough for me. I didn’t question him. If I had, I wouldn’t have gotten an answer. It was always strictly need-to-know with Sam, and since I’ve retired into the real estate and land development business, I have no ‘need-to-know’ about Company projects.”

“Then he didn’t mention having to meet anyone, or having a time schedule to keep, or—”

Palmer was shaking his head. Chet rose from his chair. “I

guess I’ve wasted your time.”

“Nonsense.” Palmer stood. “Anything I can do to help find Sam’s murderer I’ll do. I’m just sorry there was nothing I could tell you.”

Palmer strolled around the desk. Rodriguez, who had sat near Chet, also rose.

“Are you returning to Washington now?” asked Palmer.

“No. I’ll keep trying to dig up something here.”

“I see.” Palmer stopped at the door. “Talk to a detective in the state police Miami office named Gerald Gilman. He’s the investigating officer in Sam’s murder.”

Palmer opened the door and they walked out into the hallway. A lean, muscular man with shoulder-length brown hair stood there. He was about thirty, dressed in denim, and somehow looked unclean. Palmer introduced him as Chacko, nothing more. When Chet shook hands, Chacko squeezed hard.

“Smuggling is Gilman’s specialty,” resumed Palmer. “That’s why he was assigned. The cops figured Sam’s death was drug-related because of his being found near an Everglades airstrip. Drugs are always brought in by that route. But I don’t believe Sam’s murder had anything to do with drugs. Maybe something else transported by air.”



Palmer, Rodriguez, Chet, and Chacko (who Chet thought might be a bodyguard) walked into the front room.

"There you are!" The voice was female.

There were two women in the room. The speaker was a tall, shapely blonde of classic beauty. Chet's attention focused on the other woman: a blue-eyed brunette with an oval face, probably in her mid-twenties.

"I've been looking all over the house for you, John," said the blonde. "If we're going out on the cruiser, we'd better start now or we'll get caught in the traffic."

Palmer introduced the blonde as Marlene Musgrove, his fiancée. The other woman was a friend of Marlene's named Vera Myrick.

Chet thought he would like to see more of Vera Myrick and immediately got the chance. When she learned that Rodriguez was planning to drive Chet back to the hotel on Le Jeune, she insisted that she take him instead; the hotel was near the candy shop she managed. Her red '76 Volvo was parked in the stable-like garage amid Palmer's Cadillacs and Mercedes.

Chet was beginning to wonder more and more about Palmer's source of income. It did not seem possible to accumulate such an estate and his

other properties in the amount of time he had been in the land development business.

Vera told Chet about herself, and he told her about his reason for being in Florida to the extent of saying that he was trying to learn why his father was shot to death in the Everglades.

"Was your father in business with John Palmer?" asked Vera.

"No. They used to work together in the government."

"Oh. CIA." Vera giggled at the shock on Chet's face. "Everybody knows," she said. "Palmer doesn't try to hide his former employment. He sort of capitalizes on it."

"How do you mean?" asked Chet.

"Parades it. Businessmen are impressed, for some reason. And they do put up money for his projects. He's getting heavily into development projects and real estate."

"That's how he made his money."

"He told you that?"

"Yes," said Chet. "Isn't it true?"

"I don't know much about his business. Only what Marlene tells me, and that's not much. But I think he entered real estate and developments only a year ago. I believe his airplane company was the start."

A chill went down Chet's back. Airplane companies were

a favorite of the agency. Firms like Air America, Air Asia, Intermountain Aviation, and Civil Air Transport. They generated income, unlike most other fronts such as the ever-popular import-export companies and travel agencies.

"It's an air freight service for Miami businesses," Vera was saying. "Greenworld Aviation."

"Do you know of any other business he's in?" asked Chet.

"Import-export."

**"Y**es, that's the popular story of John Palmer's life," said Lieutenant Gerald Gilman.

Gilman was seated in a straight-backed swivel chair in his cluttered little office. Gilman himself was a sharp-faced man with iron-grey hair.

"You sound as if you doubt it," observed Chet.

"Money casts doubt on it, Mr. Ordway. Too much, too fast. That's suspicious anywhere, but in the drug capital of America . . ."

"You think Palmer's a drug smuggler? Do you have proof?"

"If we did, he'd be in jail. But we suspect him. His firm, Greenworld Aviation, has had too many plane crashes."

"Come again?"

"Smugglers' planes crash more frequently than anybody

else's. Planes used to haul drugs leave traces of the drug that dogs can detect. For that reason, smugglers don't have their planes serviced as often as they should, increasing the chances of a crash. When any individual or organization owns planes that have an abnormally high number of crashes, we suspect smuggling. Greenworld Aviation has had a plethora of crashes, Mr. Ordway."

Gilman was silent a minute, then asked: "Have you talked to Alex Fenton yet?"

"No. Who is he?"

"I thought you knew. Lieutenant Fenton is a colleague of mine. Your father spoke to him the day before he was murdered."

This was news to Chet. And that meant that Herb Rogers and his superiors at Langley didn't know about Fenton either.

Gilman rose and led Chet down to Fenton's office. Fenton was rather silly looking because he sported a sweeping handlebar mustache beneath a long thin nose on a long thin face. He was about Chet's age, dressed in a cheap blue polyester suit.

"Alex is strictly a smuggling expert," explained Gilman when he'd introduced the two. "That's my specialty, too, but because I have homicide experience I was assigned to the Samuel

'Ordway case. And Alex doesn't share my opinion of John Palmer."

Fenton laughed. "Palmer again? I hope Gerald hasn't convinced you that John Palmer is our local underworld chief."

"You don't think he is?" asked Chet.

"No. He just owns a bunch of antique planes that are always falling apart in the air."

Gilman excused himself, and Fenton motioned Chet to a straight-backed wooden chair.

"I'm afraid there's little I can tell you," said Fenton. "Your father came to me, said that he'd heard I was an expert in drug smuggling—"

"He did say 'drugs,' then, not just smuggling?"

"He said 'narcotics.' I told him what I knew. He was mostly interested in smuggling narcotics by airplane."

"Did he mention John Palmer?"

Fenton smiled. "No. He did mention Glen Oliver. Asked me what I knew about him. I told him I didn't know much, just that he was a smuggler who we couldn't prove was a smuggler. He owns his own airplanes, scouting helicopters, boats—the works. He also owns a mansion at Miami Beach and maybe a half-dozen luxury cars."

"Do you know if my father

ever met Oliver?"

"I don't know whom your father met, other than me. After we talked about Oliver, he thanked me and left."

Chet had not heard Fenton mention one thing that his father could not have found out about in more detail from the agency. So why didn't he contact it instead of a police lieutenant?

Unless he didn't want the agency to know what he was doing.

Chet was shown into Kenneth Sloane's office and seated in an arm-chair. Sloane's office was large, as befitted the Miami chief for the U.S. Customs Service. Its sunny walls were decorated with photographs of ships, the port, and the president. His desk had family photographs and neatly stacked papers.

Chet explained his purpose. Sloane, a heavy, middle-aged Southerner with thick glasses, listened and nodded occasionally.

"First," said Sloane, "you'd better know that it's cocaine that's smuggled by plane, not marijuana. Marijuana requires bulk shipments to make money, and that means ships."

"I don't know much about John Palmer. We suspect that he's in the cocaine traffic, but

he is ex-CIA and white. We have stronger suspicions about his lieutenant, Juan Rodriguez."

"You mean that Rodriguez might be involved in smuggling drugs and Palmer might not know it?"

"It's possible," drawled Sloane.

"Or maybe he knows but just doesn't care. Palmer used to be high in the CIA's ranks. That counts with us. Reputation. And he's white."

"You said that before. What does it mean?"

"Whites control the marijuana trade, the trade that smuggles by ships and boats. The cocaine trade—using airplanes—is controlled by Colombians and Cubans."

Chet realized that that was a strong argument against Palmer's being involved in smuggling narcotics of any sort. "Aren't there *any* white men smuggling cocaine?" he asked.

"Sure. A few small operators, a few members of the mob. The only big independent coke smuggler who is also an Anglo is Glen Oliver."

The door opened to Chet's knock. Standing just inside it was a young man. He had a crewcut and a wry left eye, was dressed in grey slacks and a yellow polo shirt. Muscles bulged beneath

the shirt. Chet knew that this was not the bookkeeper.

"I'm Chet Ordway. I have an appointment to see Mr. Oliver."

Wry-eye opened the door all the way, and Chet entered a massive living room decorated with modern furniture and Impressionist paintings. Lots of money but no taste. There were vases with flowers in them. Plastic flowers. Ming vases.

"This way," said the man. He led Chet to a room where Glen Oliver was.

Chet wasn't sure whether the room was a study or an office. It was small, dark, centered around a beautiful cedar desk. The books in the built-in bookshelves were unused, their spines showing no signs of wear. Steel filing cabinets, a heavy calculating machine, a microcomputer, and a Sony TV shared the room.

Glen Oliver was a fat man in his late forties with a round nose planted on a round face. He wore a white shirt—no coat or tie. His thinning hair was brown, his eyes grey and hostile. Large, full lips were tightly closed, as hostile as the eyes.

"Why the hell have you been asking questions about me and my business?" demanded Oliver.

Chet had only asked lawmen about Oliver—yet Oliver knew. "I'm trying to discover who murdered my father. The police

believe his death was related to a narcotics smuggling operation that used an airplane."

"So?"

"So I've been informed that you, Mr. Oliver, are the leading smuggler hereabouts who uses airplanes and the most important Anglo in the drug trade."

Oliver's face reddened in rage.

A moment later he started chuckling. Soon he was laughing hard.

"Who told you this?" he asked when he managed to stop laughing.

"The authorities."

"What authorities?"

"Just authorities." Chet heard a step behind him and swung around. The wry-eyed fellow in the polo shirt was getting ready to spring on him.

"Get out of here, Gunner," said Oliver. "Now."

Gunner left.

"Or at least one authority," said Oliver as though their conversation had not been interrupted. "A cop named Fenton."

Chet hid his surprise. And in a moment his surprise vanished. Fenton was an expert on the drug trade, meaning that he would know more about Oliver than other policemen and Oliver would know that Fenton would know. And Oliver seemed to have excellent sources of information.

"Fenton's in the narcotics

trade himself," said Oliver.

Chet smiled.

"You don't believe me?" asked Oliver. "That doesn't surprise me. Just remember, there are a lot of crooked cops around here. Fenton's paid to look the other way and to leak info on police operations. He fed you my name to get you off the trail of your old man's real murderers and to make it hot for yours truly."

"Who pays him?"

"The Osar ring. I never met your old man, although I understand he asked about me. It was Osar he was digging into."

"What's Osar?" asked Chet.

"A smuggling ring. They operate under the cover of an import-export company called Osar International. It smuggles cocaine from Colombia."

"Who's the head of it?"

"Damned if I know. I tried to find out when it first started doing business. I never found out. Could be John Palmer. Or could be Juan Rodriguez. Both are ex-CIA bigshots. Most of the people who form the Osar gang are ex-CIA, also.

"Osar International is registered in Panama. We tried to get the lowdown about it and never could. It took me over a year to discover that Rodriguez gave the orders, another half year before I learned of his connection to John Palmer."

**B**ogotá first.

But when Chet arrived in Bogotá, CIA operative Carlos Montoya, who was waiting in Chet's hotel room before Chet walked into it, told him that he had never heard of Osar or John Palmer. He had heard of Juan Rodriguez. Rodriguez was rumored to be the head of a gigantic smuggling network centered in Barranquilla and Miami. Montoya offered to fly Chet to Barranquilla in his Lear jet. Montoya was a rich businessman, thanks largely to his long association with the CIA.

They checked into the El Prado Hotel. The next morning—the fifth day of Chet's hunt—Montoya came to his room to say that contacts in Barranquilla had told him the man they should see was an accountant of German extraction named Wilhelm Zimmermann. Montoya had made an appointment to see him that morning.

"I have learned more about the Rodriguez gang," he added. "It is considered ruthless."

"Most criminal gangs are."

"This is relative to the others, *amigo*. Around Barranquilla it is true that all gangs are nefarious. Vicious. Every day there are murders here and on the peninsula. Gangs fighting gangs and killing many people. The

entire province is in a state of war, only the war is between rival gangs instead of countries. Many smugglers—many innocent people, too—have been killed."

Chet thought about that. Until now he had thought of the U.S. as the victim, Colombia as the exploiter. Yet there appeared to be more murders in Barranquilla than in Miami, called the "Murder Capital of America." Both cities profited and suffered. Cocaine meant riches and death on both sides of the counter.

"Yet even here," resumed Montoya, "the Rodriguez organization is considered ruthless. And strong. It has expertise and official protection."

Zimmermann's office was on the top floor of an old three story grey stone building occupied by companies and professionals. Montoya knocked softly upon Zimmermann's door. A blond man in his mid-forties with heavy wrinkles on his forehead opened the door. He wore a white shirt and red tie, no coat, with grey slacks and shiny black dress shoes. He looked nervous.

"I'm Carlos Montoya. This is—"

"Enter, quickly."

The man led them into an inner office, directed them to a

pair of chairs in front of his desk, then sat behind the desk. The inner office was small, cluttered, and hot. A box fan ruffled most of the papers on the messy desk while providing little relief from the heavy air. Both windows were open. A half dozen flies buzzed through the room.

"I am Wilhelm Zimmermann," said the man.

Montoya pulled out his wallet, counted out ten U.S. hundred-dollar bills, and placed them on the desk. Zimmermann scooped them up, folded them, and stuffed the wad into his front pants pocket.

"What do you want to know?" asked Zimmermann.

"Everything you know about the Juan Rodriguez organization."

"There's little I know. It's secretive—like all smuggling gangs. I *can* tell you that it is successful, powerful, and incredibly ruthless."

"Is Rodriguez the boss?" asked Chet.

"Only the front man. An Anglo is the actual manager. I don't know his name."

"John Palmer?"

"Never heard of him."

"Glen Oliver?"

"The *marimberos* who work for Oliver and those who work for Rodriguez delight in killing each other. No, not Oliver."

"How big is it?"

"It's one of the three largest in Barranquilla, which is the largest smuggling port in Colombia, which is the largest smuggling nation."

"You call the Anglo the manager," observed Montoya. "Is he not the owner?"

Zimmermann smiled smugly. "Certainly not. It is well known that the Rodriguez gang is an extension of the American CIA."

Chet was too shocked at the ridiculous charge to say anything.

"The man who used to head the CIA here is now head of Rodriguez' Barranquilla operation," continued Zimmermann. "Rodriguez himself works for the CIA."

"Used to work for it," said Chet. "Carter fired him."

"I'm told that he still works for the CIA and so does his boss—whoever he may be."

Chet didn't believe it. Even if the CIA would engage in such a thing—there were reports of the CIA-owned Air America flying narcotics for Laotian warlords during the Vietnam War—his father would not. His father set up Flink. Whatever it was, it was not a dope smuggling organization.

"I'll put through a request to the Ministry of Commerce," said the CIA station chief, a



young man with thin eyebrows and a massive jaw. "But I think it'll be a waste of time. Panama's financial laws are a hundred times stricter than Switzerland's."

"Try. And contact Langley, too. Lloyd Saunders."

"Saunders, the assistant director?" The man gave a low whistle and looked speculatively at Chet. Then he contacted the ministry—and Saunders.

Seventy-two minutes later the Ministry of Commerce notified the U.S. Embassy that Chet Ordway had permission to examine the file of Osar International, S.A.

And that's all there was: one file. A thin file at that. Chet had expected a thick file with all sorts of legal documents; he was glad that Spanish was one of the languages he had learned at prep school and Amherst.

He was seated in a small room at the Commerce Building when a middle-aged woman sent to fetch the file came with it. She handed it to Chet's guide, who handed it to Chet. The guide stood beside Chet, unwilling to leave him alone with a file for even a second.

Chet flipped it open. Inside was an application for incorporation, rubber-stamped approved. Nothing more.

It was enough.

The application contained the names of the company officers. Chet tried to hide from the two Panamanians his confusion and fear upon seeing the names. He felt empty in his stomach. The musty smell of the room and the humid heat almost sickened him. He continued to stare at the names for three, four minutes, unable to take his eyes from them:

PRESIDENT: *John Palmer, Miami, Florida, U.S.A.*

VICE-PRESIDENT: *Juan Rodriguez, Miami, Florida, U.S.A.*

SECRETARY: *Samuel Ordway, Georgetown, D.C., U.S.A.*

TREASURER: *Samuel Ordway, Georgetown, D.C., U.S.A.*

**H**erb Rogers almost lost his way. Eventually he did find the right computer room, but he found himself wishing once again that someone would label the doors.

There was only one person in the room, a young woman with silky blonde hair and a tight brown dress that accentuated her good figure. Her face betrayed her surprise when she saw him enter. Rogers didn't know her; she might know him. That was the common relation-

ship between the powerful and the powerless even in a world of secrecy.

Rogers was surprised to be here at seven thirty P.M. But Chet had phoned when he landed in Miami and asked him to check upon the ownership of an air freight company. He'd said it was urgent. It no doubt was. Tomorrow was Chet's last day of "leave." If he didn't find his father's murderer tomorrow, he never would.

"I want information about a company in Florida," he said. "Ownership and names of company officers."

The woman rose from her chair and walked to a different computer terminal where she seated herself. "The company's name?"

"Greenworld Aviation."

The blonde pushed several buttons. White letters appeared upon the pale blue screen:

GREENWORLD AVIATION IN-  
CORPORATED  
MIAMI FLORIDA  
INCORPORATED UNDER THE  
LAWS OF THE STATE OF DEL-  
AWARE  
COMPANY OFFICERS 31 DEC  
83

PALMER JOHN PRESIDENT  
RODRIGUEZ JUAN VICE  
PRESIDENT  
ORDWAY SAMUEL SECRE-  
TARY TREASURER

## OWNERSHIP (SECURITY LOCK)

No more information was forthcoming.

"What happened?" asked Rogers. "And what's a security lock?"

"No one lower in rank than an assistant director can have access to information under a security lock, sir. To release the information, an assistant director or the director himself will have to come here and insert his identification card in the computer's security scanner."

No problem, thought Rogers. He'd have Lloyd Saunders do it.

"What does it mean when a company's ownership has a security lock placed on it?"

"Usually—not always—it means that the company is a subsidiary of one of the Delaware companies, like Pacific Corporation, Southwood Enterprises, or Actum."

"Our Delaware companies," said Rogers. "So Greenworld is probably a CIA subsidiary."

"Don't jump to any rash conclusions," Rogers told Chet over the phone. "We don't know the full story here, but we both know that your father would never have been involved in anything improper."

"The Company's version of what's improper." Chet felt sick.

"I've been with the Company since 1954. I know it well enough to be certain that it would never engage in dope smuggling. As for the Osar and Greenworld registrations showing our people company officers, I have no explanation at the moment, but I'm sure there is a logical one that will exonerate both your father and the Company."

"It isn't my father I'm worried about. I'm sure he wouldn't be involved—deep down I am, anyway. I'm not so sure about the Company. Perhaps Dad didn't realize what was going on and found out, at which point the Company ordered his murder. Perhaps Palmer and Rodríguez still work for the Company, just as my source in Colombia told me they did. Perhaps their 'firing' was only a cover so they could come down here and set up a drug smuggling ring on U.S. soil."

"Nonsense," snapped Rogers. "Sam's murder wasn't the work of the Company. Neither is drug smuggling. I can't guarantee that there's no connection between the Company and Greenworld, but I am fairly certain that it isn't a subsidiary. There had to be some other reason for putting a security lock on the ownership information."

"What if you're wrong, Herb?"

"I'm not. We just wouldn't be involved in something like this. Nor would it profit us. If certain people learned about it, the Company itself could be brought down, wrecked, destroyed forever. Attempts have been made to destroy it before. As soon as Lloyd gets back to town, we'll crack that security lock and learn what's what."

"Couldn't you have another assistant director do it?"

"No. We want to keep this compartmentalized. A strict need-to-know basis. The fewer people who know, the better."

Chet didn't have to be told why. This affair was beginning to look more and more like an operation that was at least partly domestic. That would violate the CIA charter. The charter restricted CIA activities to outside the U.S. That was why Chet was given a week's "leave" instead of an official assignment.

"Lloyd is scheduled to return this morning," Rogers was saying. "His plane should land at Dulles sometime after eleven. I've left messages with his secretary and his wife for him to come see me the moment he gets in. He can unlock that information."

"What if he refuses?"

"Don't get paranoid, Chet. Of course he won't refuse. He has no reason to, and he was a close

friend of Sam's. Call me back at noon or maybe twelve thirty. I should have something for you by then."

The moment Chet hung up his receiver the phone rang again. It was the front desk: a man was waiting for him downstairs.

Juan Rodriguez. He'd come to take Chet to Palmer's estate.

Chet hadn't told Rogers that he'd made an appointment to see Palmer . . . to confront Palmer.

**"Y**ou certainly have been busy." John Palmer smiled broadly. "The Panamanian government is supposed to prevent people from seeing that sort of material."

"Then you don't deny that you're president of Osar?" said Chet.

They were seated in Palmer's office. Chacko, the bodyguard or henchman, stood behind Chet at the door.

"No reason to. I'm president of Osar, an importer of musical instruments."

"And dope," said Chet.

Palmer nodded. "And dope."

"You admit it?"

"Sure."

Chet was astonished. The admission he'd never expected to hear had come quickly, readily. "Is that why you murdered my

father?" asked Chet. "Because he found out?"

"Your father was an officer of Osar International."

"I know that. I also found out about Greenworld."

Palmer's face betrayed his surprise although he tried not to show it. "Well, it would naturally be easier under normal circumstances for you to get info on a Delaware company like Greenworld than a Panamanian firm like Osar. But the ownership was supposed to be shielded from . . . Or do you know who owns it?"

"Sure. You do."

Palmer smiled broadly. "Not even close, kid."

Chet didn't like Palmer's manner. Too confident. Maybe Chet had walked into a trap when he came out here. Or perhaps Palmer really . . . No, never.

"Now get this and get it straight," said Palmer. "I didn't kill your father, nor did anyone else in Project Flink. Your father was an important member of the project. We don't know who murdered him, but we suggest it was a smuggler named Glen Oliver."

"What's Flink?"

"Just what you suspected. Drug smuggling. Your father came up with the idea. We buy cocaine and marijuana in South America, bring it north, and

sell it through regular under-world channels. The profits help finance Company covert activities that we prefer Congress not to know about. If Congress doesn't have to approve money for a covert operation, there's no reason for it to ever learn about it."

Momentarily Chet felt light-headed. But he was sure it wasn't Oliver who killed his father. It was Palmer or someone associated with him. Nor would Palmer hesitate to lie about the purpose of Flink if he was a murderer. He was sure that his father would have no part of any drug smuggling operation, let alone initiate one.

He remembered a conversation several years ago in the Beeftender Restaurant—or was it in the Navigator Room?—in the Ordways' hometown of Edgartown, Massachusetts. He couldn't remember the place—only that it was a table in a restaurant there—but he remembered the conversation well. One of Chet's friends from prep school days had been arrested for using cocaine. He'd been a good student at Harvard, where he worked in the Pusey Library, and had planned to become a cartographer. Instead he went to prison. Chet's father had talked about how stupid the young man had been and about how detestable co-

caine and other drugs were. Not a man of monologues, there had been nothing phony about his bitter ten-minute attack on dope and dope peddlers.

"My father hated drugs," said Chet. "Ideologically and personally. He was of the old order, remember? Law and order, Republican, Harvard, the right fork and the right tie."

"Chacko, do I lie?" asked Palmer.

"Not this time."

"You're trying to sell me something, Palmer. I don't buy it."

Palmer looked for a moment as though he would continue to argue, but then he settled back in his chair. "I'm usually a good persuader," he said. "I'm sorry I couldn't persuade you. It would've been easier for both of us if I had."

Palmer's eyes looked beyond Chet.

"Chacko," he said.

Chet started to protest that Herb Rogers knew that he would see Palmer that morning, but he never had the chance to utter his own lie. He heard Chacko move behind him, braced himself as much as he could within that second of time, then something solid and hard hit him on the back of the head.

Stars floated in a grey mist for several seconds, and then everything turned black.

**H**erb Rogers watched while Lloyd Saunders removed his identification card from its leather folder and inserted it into the computer scanner where the operator named Pete directed. Pete pushed several buttons, then nodded at Saunders, who withdrew his card. Pete pushed five more buttons, then stood, turned, and walked several paces from the terminal while the information began to appear on the pale blue screen:

GREENWORLD AVIATION INCORPORATED

MIAMI FLORIDA

INCORPORATED UNDER THE LAWS OF THE STATE OF DELAWARE

COMPANY OFFICERS 31 DEC 83

PALMER JOHN PRESIDENT  
RODRIGUEZ JUAN VICE PRESIDENT

ORDWAY SAMUEL SECRETARY TREASURER

OWNERSHIP HELD THRU COMPANY PROJECT FLINK

ORDWAY SAMUEL PROJECT CHIEF

PALMER JOHN ASSISTANT PROJECT CHIEF

RODRIGUEZ JUAN ASSISTANT TO THE ASSISTANT PROJECT CHIEF

SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS  
GREENWORLD AVIATION OPERATION OF PROJECT FLINK

ESTABLISHMENT INTERNATIONAL TRADING COMPANY PANAMA

INSERT ESTABLISHMENT

ACHIEVED AS OSAR  
INTERNATIONAL OFFICERS IDENTICAL  
TO GREENWORLD

RELEASE OF PALMER JOHN AND RODRIGUEZ JUAN WITH OTHER AGENCY PERSONNEL TO COINCIDE WITH RELEASE OF OTHER OPERATIVES BY PRESIDENT USA

RELEASE ARTIFICIAL SALARIES MAINTAINED CURRENT LEVELS AND PAID SWISS ACCOUNT

KEYLOY SEVEN NINE FIVE DASH TWO ONE TWO HANS UND ZIECHT INTERNATIONAL

CREDIT BANK ZURICH SWITZERLAND

PROJECT FLINK PURPOSE\*\*\*\*\*

GREENWORLD AVIATION INCORPORATED PURPOSE IS TO ACTIVATE AND OPERATE PROJECT FLINK THRU PURCHASE AND SALES OF USED AIRCRAFT

AGENT COMPANY FOR PROJECT FLINK OWNERSHIP OF GREENWORLD AVIATION INCORPORATED AND PARENT COMPANY OF GREENWORLD AVIATION INCORPORATED IS SOUTHWOOD ENTERPRISES INCORPORATED WILMINGTON

DELAWARE END DATA.

"So Southwood does own Greenworld," said Saunders.

"Meaning that Chet was right: it is a CIA subsidiary." Rogers continued to stare at the screen. "What does 'release artificial' mean?"

"That Palmer and those other people down there who were supposedly fired in Carter's purge still work for us. They were released at the same time that Carter cut back on our covert activities, but as *part of* a covert activity. Their terminations were just a cover. . . . The question now is: *what are they doing for us?*"

"What do the asterisks after the words 'Project Flink purpose' indicate?" asked Rogers.

"That the information is so classified it isn't included with the information on its active arm, Greenworld Aviation. We'll have to go after it separately."

"After Sam's murder, I personally saw to it that almost every computer we owned was quizzed for information on any project called Flink."

"That's the problem." Saunders folded his arms across his chest and continued to stare at the terminal screen. "You inquired directly about the project. It can't be released on a direct inquiry. Only through use of the active agent, in this

case Greenworld, and even then there might be a special lock that'll prevent us from retrieving the data. Often no data is put into a computer when a project is set up through the blind pool. This time there's information stored away, but we may not be able to get it out."

Saunders called Pete over and told him about the lock. Pete tried again:

GREENWORLD AVIATION IN-  
CORPORATED MASTER PROJ-  
ECT REQUEST FOR PURPOSE  
PURPOSE OF PROJECT  
FLINK\*\*\*\*\*

"No soap," said Saunders. "There must be some way to unlock that data."

"Somebody can do it, sir," said Pete. "Perhaps we can ask the computer to name who can release the lock and his substitute."

"Substitute?"

"If it's a covert project, the project activator designates a substitute in case something happens to him. That's so the information can't be trapped inside the computer if the Company has to have it and the activator of the project has died or is otherwise unavailable."

The new readout on the pale blue screen read:

GREENWORLD AVIATION IN-



CORPORATED MASTER PROJ-  
ECT PROJECT FLINK  
REQUEST FOR LOCK HOLD  
ACTIVATOR  
ACTIVATOR ORDWAY SAM-  
UEL  
SUBSTITUTE ORDWAY CHET

"He must have been aware that his father designated him," said Saunders.

"Chet wasn't aware that his father had anything to designate," said Rogers. "We'll have to have Chet fly up and release the lock by inserting the identification card. He should've phoned by now. I'll call him back and tell him to get up here pronto."

After Rogers returned to his office, he phoned Communications to ask if there had been any calls while he'd been out. There had been none.

Rogers looked at his wristwatch: it was eight minutes past one. Chet should have called more than half an hour ago.

He tried Chet's hotel. The desk clerk said that Chet had left earlier with a Latin-looking man. Rogers informed Saunders.

Rogers lit a Camel, leaned back in his chair in thought. A minute passed before he had a call placed to the Miami office of the Florida state police. He finally reached an officer fa-

miliar with the case. Rogers asked the man's help in discovering whether something bad had happened to Chet. Alex Fenton promised to investigate immediately.

Lloyd Saunders decided he too should make a phone call. He instructed Communications to patch him through to Juan Rodriguez.

Chet had braced himself for the blow. If he hadn't, he might have remained unconscious around the clock. Instead he woke up sooner than Palmer thought he would. The first thing he was aware of was the gag in his mouth.

He was being carried. At first he had only a vague sense of floating, of being suspended in the air. Not smoothly. Chet was vibrated with each step of the men who carried him, and he was aware of that even before he was aware that he was being carried.

Then he opened his eyes. Chacko had his feet. Chacko was leading the way into one of the open doors of Palmer's long white garage. Someone else had him by the shoulders.

"Put him in the back of the van," said Palmer. His voice came from a distance; it wasn't he who had his shoulders.

Chet was lifted up into the rear of a white VW van, its butterfly doors open, parked in the garage. They dropped him belly-down onto its floor. Chet pretended unconsciousness. He halfway wished he was still out: at least he wouldn't feel the painful throbbing in his head.

"Where should we do it?" asked Chacko in his raspy voice.

"Same as before," said the man who had carried him by the shoulders.

"Not the Everglades again, Wade," said Palmer. "Thanks to what this creep has dug up—and what they know he's dug up—it would make us the prime suspects."

"What then?" asked Wade.

"Chacko, doesn't our friend Glen Oliver have a warehouse that he doesn't use?"

"Sure, out on Eleventh. The cops kept raiding it. They never found anything, but Oliver doesn't want to take chances by putting something important there. Sometimes he stores some legitimate merchandise there, but usually it sits empty. He's got it listed with a real estate broker for sale."

"Then that's where we should take him," said Palmer. "Get inside that warehouse and waste him in there, then leave him. One of us could phone the police with an anonymous tip that Oliver's boys had taken a man

into his Eleventh Street warehouse and when the boys came out, the man didn't."

Chet tugged at the rope that bound his wrists behind him. Another bound his ankles. He had to free himself.

But he couldn't. The ropes were strong and tight.

"I like that," said Chacko. "We get rid of him and we also point the finger at Oliver."

"Ron, get a padlock," Palmer told Wade. "To enter the warehouse we'll have to break Oliver's own lock. If the police find the busted lock they'll know that someone broke in."

"Where'm I supposed to find a padlock?"

"They're several in the tool shed. Side cabinet on the left. And hurry. Juan will be here any minute."

Chet continued to strain at the wrist rope. He couldn't loosen it. The rope seemed to dig deeper into his flesh each time he tugged.

He looked for something that might help him. It was hard to see because the van's interior was dark, although the open door allowed light to enter the garage. Chet wondered what time it was. He'd come out here early in the morning, but there was no way of knowing how long he'd been unconscious. The light was inadequate to see all of the van's interior, but he

could see the area near him and there was nothing on the floor that could help him—no chips of glass, nails, jagged sticks. Nothing.

"Someone's coming," called Chacko.

Maybe help, thought Chet. No. More likely Rodriguez.

Why hadn't he told Rogers before he came out here? Stupid!

He wondered if his father had also come to confront Palmer. If he had, that had been his fatal mistake. He remembered the ancient proverb: *Tel pere, tel fils*.

Chet strained again against the rope binding his wrists. It cut into his flesh:

"Who is it?" asked Palmer.

"Fenton," said Chacko.

"What the hell's he doing out here?"

Chet stopped struggling and lay still, listening.

He heard the approaching footfalls.

"What's up?" asked Palmer.

"I didn't want to chance calling you. Your phones have probably been bugged ever since Samuel Ordway's death. . . . I got a call a little while ago from no less than the CIA itself. From a fellow named Herbert Rogers. He expressed his concern that Chet Ordway was in trouble. Seems that he was last seen leaving his hotel with a

Latin-looking fellow."

"That's trouble," said Chacko. "They'll know it was Juan."

"Chacko, there are many Latin men in Miami. Glen Oliver has some on his payroll."

"But if a hotel employee identifies Juan—"

"That won't happen."

Palmer said the words with such cold finality that Chet understood that some sort of violent action was contemplated to prevent the identification. Palmer was unlikely to kill his own lieutenant, so a hotel employee was probably going to be his victim: Doubtless Palmer did have the resources to discover which employee had seen Chet leave the hotel with Juan Rodriguez that morning.

Chet heard a motor vehicle approaching. The others in the garage continued to talk, not yet hearing it, until several seconds later when Chacko said, "Listen."

Palmer told Chacko to investigate. Chacko went to the garage door, called back, "It's Juan."

Chet tugged fiercely at the rope. The energy he used and the pain he brought upon his wrists were wasted: the rope wouldn't yield. He could feel the warmth of his own blood where the rope had cut into his flesh during his struggling.

He could hear Rodriguez' Cadillac pull up to the garage door and stop. The motor went off, then two doors opened and a moment later both slammed shut.

Rodriguez entered. "John, I don't like this," he said. "It's murder."

"It's an execution," said Palmer firmly. "The words from Langley were quote terminate with extreme prejudice unquote. And you damn well know what that means. . . . Look, Juan, I don't like this any more than you do. But that Ordway kid is jeopardizing the whole operation. He could blow it, wasting all our work and putting the Company in hot water with Congress, the press, and just about the whole country."

"I understand that. I just don't like the idea of killing an innocent person. Even when authorized—or ordered. He is innocent. Chet didn't realize what he was doing. He was just trying to find out who murdered Sam. You can't blame him for that."

"Of course not."

Chet listened in disbelief. It was the CIA! It had been the CIA all along! The CIA had been smuggling dope into the U.S. just as Zimmermann claimed. The CIA had been behind his father's murder. Had committed his father's murder. And the CIA had ordered his

own murder—his "execution."

The whole thing was insane. And who in the agency had ordered the murders? Certainly not Rogers, nor the director. Saunders? Maybe. Or perhaps one of the other assistant directors.

"None of us likes it," Palmer was telling Rodriguez. "But it has to be done. We have to protect Flink at all costs."

"He's Sam's kid."

"Do you think Sam would want him down here?" demanded Palmer, angry now. "Don't forget Sam set this operation up—gave his life for it. Don't forget that he was working on Flink when Glen Oliver or whoever it was killed him. It doesn't matter that it's Sam's kid. He isn't doing what Sam would want."

The throbbing in Chet's head became unbearable. He couldn't allow himself to believe Palmer's words. His father wouldn't set up a dope smuggling operation, even for the CIA. And it was Palmer who had murdered him, not Oliver. It had to be Palmer!

"I still think it's murder," said Rodriguez.

"Look, Juan," interposed Chacko furiously, "I'm tired of your weak-kneed whining and complaining. If you don't want to do your job, fine. Leave and we'll handle your share of this mess ourselves."

"I'll do my part."

"Then put a button on all this chatter and do it."

"That's enough," said Palmer. "Chacko, you ride up front with me. Juan, you get in back and make sure that Ordway doesn't work his way free or somehow give an alarm when we pass the security gate."

"I'll leave now," said Alex Fenton.

"Right. I don't want those guards to see us coming out of the neighborhood at the same time."

Fenton walked off.

"Pedro," continued Palmer, apparently addressing the man who had arrived with Rodriguez, "you stay behind. You can leave after he gets back."

"Look at that," said Rodriguez. His voice sounded astonished. Chacko whistled softly.

"Chet," said Palmer, "I'll say this much for you: you're a fighter."

"But dumb," added Chacko. "You cut up your hands for nothing."

There were several seconds of silence; then Palmer walked to the front of the van. Chacko joined him. Rodriguez lifted himself into the van. He sat against its wall, staring down at Chet and at the blood from his wrists.

Chet heard Palmer, Chacko, and Ron Wade climb into the front of the van. Someone

started the engine. Someone—probably Pedro—closed the rear doors, throwing the van's interior into darkness.

The van began to move. First backwards out of the garage, then a turn, and then forward down Palmer's private road. Soon the twists and turns revealed that the van was on the neighborhood road.

Eventually Palmer warned Juan Rodriguez to duck down because they were coming to the neighborhood security gate.

The gate was Chet's last hope. He would try to yell through the gag, but he was certain that the guards wouldn't be able to hear him. The loudest sound he could make would be a low grunt that would be inaudible outside.

It was hopeless.

Suddenly the pain in his wrists increased. Rodriguez was pulling on the rope. Chet looked back, furious, and Rodriguez stopped. Rodriguez held up his right hand to show Chet what he had been using to move the rope.

A jackknife.

Rodriguez was cutting the rope!

"S hhh," whispered Rodriguez after he had finished. "Don't move yet."

He gently put Chet's wrists back together. Chet held them

there, and waited.

The van began to slow. It had reached the security gate that protected Palmer and his affluent neighbors from the outside world.

Rodriguez reached into his blazer and pulled out a Mauser. He slipped off the safety. He was gripping the handle tightly, and beads of sweat were forming on his forehead.

The van stopped.

Silence.

Then—from outside the van—"Mornng, Mr. Palmer."

"Joe," said Palmer in reply.

"Looks like you got a flat coming up. Your left front tire's pretty low. . . . You better take a look."

For a moment no one moved, no one spoke, and even in back Chet could feel the extraordinary tension of his abductors.

"Ron," said Palmer at last; "take a look."

A door opened.

Now the van's interior was lighted. Sunlight streamed through the open door, while the door's opening had activated the overhead bulb. Chet could see as clearly as if he were lying on the ground outside instead of on the van's floor. What he kept his eyes on was that Mauser held by Rodriguez.

Suddenly Ron Wade's voice shouted from outside: "Police behind us!"

"Freeze!" cried two separate voices outside.

Rodriguez aimed at the backs of Palmer and Chacko. "Don't move," he said. "I've got you covered."

"Juan, what the—" began Palmer, but he didn't have time to finish because Chacko spun around and fired.

Rodriguez couldn't pull his trigger; Chacko's bullet tore through his brain first. Rodriguez collapsed onto the floor.

More shots, this time from outside. Bullets ricocheted off the van. Palmer and Chacko ducked behind the dashboard. Then Palmer threw the gears into reverse and floored the accelerator. The van began speeding backwards.

Chet reached for Rodriguez' gun. He almost cried out from the pain in his wrist. But he eased his right hand toward Rodriguez' dead right hand continually, slowly, and silently. He bore the pain by thinking of how his father had died and been left to rot in the Everglades and how his mother and sisters had cried at the funeral.

Because of Palmer.

His fingers touched Rodriguez' hand. . . . Slowly, carefully, he removed the dead hand from the Mauser. Slowly, carefully, he placed his own palm over the gun, slowly closed his hand upon the handle, and wrapped

his right index finger around the trigger. Not tightly. He couldn't afford to fire accidentally before he aimed; if he did, Chacko would kill him with the same ease he'd killed Rodríguez. And the van was bouncing violently. Palmer was now back in his seat, had turned the van around, and was speeding away from the gate.

Apparently Palmer planned to return to his house. Maybe make a stand there. More likely he hoped to call in one of his helicopters to rescue him.

Chet brought the gun forward, holding it on the floor between his head and the men in front of him, to aim. He wasn't confident that he could pull the trigger. He'd never killed anyone.

Moving the Mauser into position was painful.

He would have called upon Palmer to stop, but the gag prevented that. He would have to fire a warning shot into the dashboard or windshield and hope that the pair would surrender. The windshield.

He fired.

The windshield shattered.

Chacko swung around— instantly, wordlessly, automatically—and fired. His bullet hit Chet in his left thigh, boring a hole through it. Chet screamed into the gag. Palmer released the wheel to cover his face and

look behind him—all at the same instant.

The van—traveling fast—hit something and went wild. Chet tried to shoot Chacko, but the bouncing made it impossible for him to aim. Chacko got off one shot, but it entered the roof because at that moment the van turned over.

The crash was violent. Chet was thrown sideways, landing on top of Rodríguez' body. He managed to hold onto the Mauser. Palmer was thrown against Chacko, Chacko against the steel door jamb.

Chacko shoved Palmer off him and looked into the rear of the van, raising his pistol to fire again.

Chet aimed at Chacko and fired first.

Chacko screamed, flew back against the dashboard, and yellow teeth shot out from his mouth. Chacko's gun fell.

"Don't shoot!" cried Palmer. "I surrender! Don't shoot me!"

Chet could hear sirens approaching. It was almost over.

He kept the Mauser on Palmer but didn't fire. He wanted to, but couldn't bring himself to do it. He almost wished that Palmer had fought the way Chacko had. He dearly wanted to kill John Palmer.

Chet kept the Mauser trained upon Palmer's head until the



siren-screaming cars skidded to a stop outside. He waited for someone to enter the wrecked van and take charge.

It seemed as if hours were passing instead of seconds. The pain in his thigh was bad but nothing compared to the pain in his wrists while he held the heavy Mauser.

"Come out with your hands up!" someone outside shouted. "We've got you covered."

Darkness closed in upon Chet and enveloped him.

**R**ogers was waiting at the door. Chet didn't offer him his hand. His wrists still hurt too much, although the danger that doctors would have to amputate his left hand had passed. He would eventually have their full use again but would have bad scars on his wrists forever.

He limped into the computer room. Lloyd Saunders was already there, standing beside a man seated at one of the terminals.

"Any word from Miami?" asked Chet.

"Palmer still claims it was an agency operation," said Saunders.

"And we still don't buy it," said Rogers.

"Rodriguez did," said Chet.

Saunders nodded. "Until I phoned him, yes, he did. He said

that your father had set up Flink and that Palmer was running it. When I asked him what its purpose was, Rodriguez said that it was organized to smuggle narcotics into the U.S. from Colombia to give financial support to CIA activities in Latin America. When I asked him who told him that, he said Palmer had."

"And that's the key," interrupted Rogers. "Palmer told him, not Sam. Sam never told him anything."

"Right," said Saunders. "Rodriguez knew that Sam set up the project, but that's all he knew about Sam's involvement other than what Palmer told him. Because Rodriguez did believe it was a bonafide agency operation, it wasn't hard for him to believe Palmer's story about Sam's being murdered by Glen Oliver or some other dope smuggler."

Rogers lit a Camel. "It's another example of Sam's need-to-know policy. But this time it backfired, we think."

"But you're not sure," said Chet coldly. "Not even now."

"No," said Saunders. "We're not."

"I am," said Rogers.

"Maybe you are, Herb, but the rest of us aren't. I'm sorry, Chet, but we can't afford to be sure until we have evidence. I think that evidence is locked

inside this computer's memory banks. I'm ninety-nine and nine-tenths percent certain of it."

Chet looked at the terminal. The operator was seated behind it, waiting, pretending to pay no attention to the conversation.

"You see," continued Saunders, "two big questions remain unanswered. Rodriguez couldn't answer them when I called him on the phone, and Palmer won't answer them now on the advice of his attorney. The others, Pedro Martinez and that lot, say that they were only following Palmer's orders and that they did so because he was their superior officer within the agency."

"What are the questions?"

"First, what was the real purpose of Flink? Second, why was it involved in narcotics smuggling?"

"Aren't you forgetting a third question?" said Chet.

Saunders glanced at Rogers, then looked back at Chet. "No, we know the answer to that one."

Chet said nothing, just waited for Saunders to continue.

"It was Chacko and a police lieutenant," said Saunders. "They acted on Palmer's orders."

"Was this lieutenant Alex Fenton?"

"Yes. Ron Wade—the only

agency employee besides Palmer and Chacko who apparently knew what was going on—confessed yesterday. He told the whole story as he knew it; then Fenton confessed yesterday afternoon. I think he did it hoping for mercy from the court, but Florida judges are not famous for their mercy."

"And he also named Palmer?"

"Yes. They tied Palmer to your father's murder. Both of them. If they hadn't talked, we could've gotten Palmer for smuggling, kidnapping, assault and battery, attempted murder, you name it, but not have proved his part in Sam's murder. Now we've got him for that also."

Chet thought about Saunders' use of the word "we." Wade and Fenton had probably confessed to the police, not the CIA. But if Saunders hadn't taken the initiative after Rogers told him of Chet's failure to call him at noon when he was supposed to, hadn't called Rodriguez to make a direct inquiry about Flink and Palmer, Chet would be on a steel slab inside the Miami morgue. Yes, Saunders had the right to say "we."

"Palmer told Fenton to lure Sam into the Everglades," continued Saunders. "Fenton told Sam that he'd received a tip that one of Palmer's airplanes

was going to land on a specific hunter's strip in the Everglades. Sam had gone to Fenton earlier with his suspicions about Palmer. Anyway, Sam went out there with Fenton. There was no plane, only Chacko waiting in a Jeep. Chacko pulled the trigger."

"I'm glad it was him," said Chet.

Chacko had died two days ago, one day after Chet's bullet had smashed through the gunman's teeth into the lower left side of his brain.

"But that still leaves the other two questions," pressed Saunders. He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and frowned. "It takes both our cards to get the data out."

Chet looked at the terminal without making any move to approach it. "I think I know what happened," he said.

"What?"

"Dad set up Flink to do a job. I don't know what sort of job, but it involved his setting up the front companies. He organized everything. And the organization he established was the one that Rodriguez and the others were placed into by the agency."

"By Sam," said Saunders.

Chet glared at Saunders, wanting to hit him. He didn't. Saunders was Authority. Besides, the condition of his wrists

prevented him from hitting anyone.

"By Dad as the CIA officer-in-charge," said Chet. "But when Dad flew back to Washington, Palmer was left to run things—and he ran them for his personal profit instead of for the project purpose."

"Very likely." Saunders' voice was cold and impersonal.

"I think I even know the purpose: identifying smugglers. I don't know why Dad wanted to identify them, but I think that was why Greenworld Aviation was established to buy and sell used airplanes. These airplanes were bought from all over the country and sold in Florida. In Florida there's no larger customer for used airplanes than smugglers. Their planes frequently crash or are just used for one run and then abandoned."

"I would've never thought of that," admitted Saunders. "It would be the best way to identify them."

"If you're right," said Rogers, "Palmer is finished."

Chet spun his head around to look at Rogers; Saunders gave Rogers an annoyed look.

"What do you mean *if* I'm right. Palmer is finished?" demanded Chet. "He's finished anyway: murder, kidnapping, smuggling.... What's going on?"

Rogers turned his gaze to the thick green carpet that covered the floor.

Chet glanced at Saunders, who quickly looked off toward the other terminals, acting as though he had an interest in their appearance.

"What's going on?" repeated Chet.

Neither Saunders nor Rogers answered. Then Rogers looked at Saunders and pled, "Tell him."

"Yes," said Chet. "Tell me. Why isn't he finished yet?"

"All right, Chet." Saunders turned to face him. "I'll level. If Palmer is telling the truth—or if he's lying and we can't prove it—the agency is obligated to him."

"Obligated? What the hell are you talking about?"

"So far, every indication is that Palmer headed an agency project. The records show that he and his men still drew agency pay, that their termination was phony. Palmer persists in claiming that what he did he did only for us."

"Go on."

"We have an obligation to our people. And if we can't prove that Palmer acted privately, we'll be forced to assume that this narcotics smuggling operation was a CIA project—devised by Sam."

Chet hardly noticed the shot

of pain in his thigh he was so mad. He wanted to punch Saunders—glasses or no glasses—right in his smug bureaucratic face. Instead he demanded: "What does all that mean?"

"That the CIA will request that the Justice Department quash the indictments against Palmer, Wade, and all others involved in the Flink organization on the grounds that prosecution would endanger our national security."

Chet struggled to retain control of himself. He wanted to smash Saunders' face the same way he'd blasted apart Chacko's.

Saunders, lips tight, looked away from him. "Even Wade won't admit that Sam didn't order the smuggling. . . ." He didn't finish.

Chet was sure that if he'd still had some use of his hands he would've used them on Saunders.

"Insert your card," said Saunders.

Chet stared at him, waiting for him to look back. Saunders continued to stare off to the right.

Chet turned, slipped his card into the terminal's identification scanner. The operator pushed several buttons. He asked Saunders to insert his own card. When this was done, the operator pushed more but-

tons, then rose from his chair, stepped away, and turned his back to the screen.

Digital white letters appeared on the pale blue screen one after another to form one word after another:

GREENWORLD AVIATION INCORPORATED MASTER PROJECT FLINK REQUEST FOR PURPOSE

PURPOSE FLINK TO LEARN IDENTIFICATION OF NARCOTICS SMUGGLING RINGS SOUTH FLORIDA AND NATURE OF OPERATIONS. AFTER IDENTIFICATION MADE THRU SALES USED AIRPLANES BY GREENWORLD AVIATION EFFORT WILL BE MADE EMPLOY. SMUGGLERS EXPERTISE IN CLANDESTINE OPERATIONS AGAINST CUBAN AGENTS AND FORCES IN CENTRAL AMERICA AND CARIBBEAN. IF COOPERATION NOT FORTHCOMING ALL INFORMATION RELEASED TO JUSTICE. IF COOPERATION IS FORTHCOMING LIMITED IMMUNITY FROM PROSECUTION OFFERED BUT NOT FOR MURDER OR OTHER MAJOR CRIMES OTHER THAN SMUGGLING.

INSERT ONE BY SAMUEL ORDWAY GREENWORLD AVIATION INCORPORATED EST DELAWARE SUBSIDIARY

OF SOUTHWOOD ENTERPRISES

INSERT TWO BY SAMUEL ORDWAY OSAR INTERNATIONAL EST PANAMA TO COOPERATE GREENWORLD AVIATION

INSERT THREE BY SAMUEL ORDWAY JOHN PALMER REPORTS ALL WELL FLORIDA SEPT 83.

INSERT FOUR BY SAMUEL ORDWAY JOHN PALMER REPORTS ALL WELL IN PROJECT FEB 84.

INSERT FIVE BY SAMUEL ORDWAY JUAN RODRIGUEZ REPORTS ALL WELL IN PROJECT JULY 84 HOWEVER OFFERED NO EVIDENCE OF SUCCESS. RODRIGUEZ KNOWLEDGE RESTRICTED.

INSERT SIX BY SAMUEL ORDWAY JOHN PALMER OFFERED TO MAKE FULL REPORT WITHIN THREE MONTHS ON PROGRESS OF PROJECT NOV 84

INSERT SEVEN BY SAMUEL ORDWAY PALMER AGAIN PROMISED REPORT THIS TIME TWO MONTHS APRIL 85

INSERT EIGHT BY SAMUEL ORDWAY JOHN PALMER OFFERING MULTITUDE OF EXCUSES FOR LACK OF REPORT JULY 85. HAVE REPORT OF FORMER SUBORDINATE THAT PALMER LIVING HIGH ABOVE WHAT INCOME SHOULD PRO-

VIDE. HAVE DETERMINED TO  
GO MIAMI PERSONALLY TO  
INSPECT PROGRESS PROJECT  
FLINK.

They waited for more letters,  
more words, to appear upon the  
screen.

None did.

For a minute no one spoke.  
Then Rogers said: "No drug  
smuggling, Chet."

"Chet, you were right," said  
Saunders. "You called it ex-  
actly the way it was."

"The rest is obvious," said  
Rogers. "Sam went down, in-  
vestigated, suspected Palmer  
and maybe even told him that  
he suspected him, and Palmer  
ordered Fenton and Chacko to  
kill him."

"Palmer will not get immu-  
nity," said Saunders. "The courts  
can put him away for life and

we're not obligated to lift one  
finger to help him."

"Our only obligation," said  
Rogers, "is to help the prose-  
cution any way we can."

Chet stared at the screen. He  
stared at it for a full minute  
before he turned and began  
walking toward the door.

"Chet," said Saunders, "I hope  
that you're not mad at me for  
what I said about Palmer's  
maybe getting a national se-  
curity cloak. It wasn't my wish,  
you know that. But, well, we  
have rules and—"

Chet walked out into the  
hallway. He turned in the di-  
rection that would take him  
past all the unidentified doors  
with their combination locks to  
the front of the building, across  
the big eagle in the floor, out-  
side to the parking lot, to es-  
cape.



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# UNSOLVED

by Roger Hufford

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the March issue.

The Vicksburg Veracities were a very popular team because they were more truthful than most. All of them can be trusted to tell the truth when they say what position a man *does not* play. All of them, except for the three outfielders, who always lie when making positive statements, tell the truth when they say what position a man *does* play.

- |              |  |
|--------------|--|
| <i>Abner</i> | Hank plays right field.<br>Ernie is not the center fielder.    |
| <i>Ben</i>   | Ernie plays first base.<br>Dick is not the first baseman.      |
| <i>Chris</i> | Frank is the right fielder.<br>Frank is not the third baseman. |
| <i>Dick</i>  | Abner is the pitcher.<br>Frank is not the third baseman.       |
| <i>Ernie</i> | Chris plays center field.<br>Ben is not the shortstop.         |
| <i>Frank</i> | Chris plays shortstop.<br>Ian is not the center fielder.       |
| <i>Gus</i>   | Dick is the catcher.<br>Chris is not the catcher.              |
| <i>Hank</i>  | Chris is the left fielder.<br>Gus is not the catcher.          |
| <i>Ian</i>   | Gus plays second base.<br>Hank is not the pitcher.             |

*What position does each man play?*

See page 127 for the solution to the January puzzle.

"The Vicksburg Veracities," taken from Challenging Puzzles in Logic by Roger Hufford. Copyright © 1982 by Roger Hufford. Dover Publications, Inc., New York, N.Y.

# The Investment in Murder Mystery



by James A. Noble

**W**innie looked up from her knitting when she heard the front door opening. "Thatch, is that you?"

"Yes, dear," came Thatcher's voice from the hallway.

"Where on earth have you

been all day? This is the second time this week you've taken off without giving me the slightest idea where you were going."

"Yes, dear." His voice now appeared to be coming from the kitchen.

Winnie got the impression he wasn't paying the least bit of attention to what she was saying.

"I've filed for divorce today," she called, testing her theory.

"Yes, dear," was Thatch's only reply.

Winnie sighed and shook her head.

Thatch appeared in the doorway holding a large vase containing a multitude of red and white roses. "Had to put these in water, you know."

"What on earth . . . ?"

"For you, my sweets," replied Thatcher, setting the vase on the coffee table in front of her.

"Oh, Thatch. They're lovely."

Winnie dropped her knitting in her lap and reached for the flowers to correct their random arrangement.

Thatcher removed a small gift-wrapped box from his pocket and set it in her outstretched hand. "And this."

"You shouldn't have, really," said Winnie, obviously pleased.

"Did I hear you say you filed something today?" asked Thatcher as Winnie tore at the gift wrap.

He never received an answer. Winnie gently removed the gold necklace with teardrop pendant from its box. Light from the diamond cluster reflected off her glasses.

Thatch chuckled. "May I as-

sume you forgive me for that chain saw I bought you for our anniversary last month?"

"Of course." She planted a big smooch on his cheek. "Would you help me on with it?" she requested as she jumped up in front of the mirror above the fireplace.

Winnie spent the better part of the next five minutes turning this way and that, admiring the necklace in the mirror, before she made the statement Thatch knew would be coming.

"We can't possibly afford it, you know."

Thatch assumed a smug grin as he stood behind her watching her expression in the mirror. "Oh, yes we can. I bought it from the profits of a little investment I made two years ago."

"I don't recall any investment we made back then."

"Yes, well, perhaps you'd better sit down," suggested Thatch, leading her from the mirror.

"Do you remember that discussion we had about putting some of our money into Lockner Investment Company?" he asked, once they were comfortable.

"I certainly do. And you'll recall I was dead set against entrusting our money to that firm. I suspected they had a few mobsters and gangsters among their clientele."

Thatcher began rubbing his

hands together nervously. "That was merely a suspicion. Besides, that doesn't necessarily reflect on the integrity of the investment company itself. They had a great portfolio and . . ."

"You didn't," gasped Winnie. "And after we agreed we would always discuss our investments together."

"The key word is 'discuss' . . ."

"How much did you invest, Thatch?"

"You must remember . . ."

"How much?" interrupted Winnie again.

"Just two thousand dollars," replied Thatch, defensively. "And we realized a net gain of somewhere around fifteen hundred dollars in just two years. Now, that's quite a return."

"Heaven knows what they used our money for. We probably provided capital for racketeering, illegal gambling . . ."

"Strictly legitimate stocks," said Thatch. "I've got a complete record of the investments they made for us."

Winnie seemed somewhat relieved. "Thank goodness for that. So that's what you've been doing today. You decided to go to the Lockner Investment Company and withdraw our funds to buy me the necklace."

Thatcher merely grunted.

"Thatch?"

"Well, not exactly. Actually, I got a letter from Charles Lockner, founder of the investment firm, advising me to recover our money, as they would soon be dissolving the company. I went over to their offices earlier this week."

"And got our money?"

Thatch cleared his throat. "No, I couldn't get the money until today. I had to get it at the police station. They've been holding it as evidence in a murder investigation."

"Murder investigation?"

Winnie's eyes got as big as the pendant dangling from the necklace.

"Yes, it appears that a Mr. Henry Barstow, the other man in the Lockner Investment Company, was gunned down in the parking lot outside the office building where the firm was located."

"Did I hear you correctly? Did you say 'the other man in the Lockner Investment Company'? Just how big was the firm you sent our money to?"

"Just . . . three people . . . if you count the secretary."

Winnie shook her head and clucked softly. "You put our money into an investment firm consisting of only three people, one of whom is now a murder victim."

"But we made a profit," pointed out Thatch, weakly.

"Why don't you tell me about this Lockner and the murder from the beginning," suggested Winnie, her curiosity now aroused.

"From what Charles Lockner told me during my visit earlier this week, he formed the company about three years ago," began Thatch. "Business was poor at first. Then he took on a quiet little man named Henry Barstow.

"Apparently this Barstow was an absolute genius at computing trends in the stock market. He spent a considerable amount of his waking hours calculating figures and plotting graphs on the future of individual companies in the market. Shy and withdrawn, he stayed in the background doing his computations while Lockner performed the managerial duties and met the clients.

"Before a year had passed, the Lockner Company was realizing remarkable profits for their small group of clients, thanks mostly to Barstow's ability and workaholic attitude. Word soon got around, and Lockner Investment began to pick up new investors. Lockner hired a secretary to help with the rapidly growing business."

"I would think a bigger investment company would try to hire Henry Barstow away from

Lockner," said Winnie.

"It was tried," replied Thatch. "The fact that Barstow was the main reason for the success of the company was common knowledge among Lockner's clients, but Lockner paid Barstow a substantial salary plus a commission.

"Lockner made it a point to keep his employee away from any contact with other people. Barstow seemed to be satisfied working quietly in his little office on his charts and graphs. He never had a desire to work elsewhere.

"Everything went reasonably well for the company. Then, just last Thursday, Barstow was found in the parking lot, shot to death.

"Charles Lockner had come to depend on the little man's guidance for future stock purchases to such a degree that now, with Barstow dead, he decided to dissolve the firm and advised his clients of his decision. He even offered to sell their stock for any customers who had investments through his company."

"Which you decided to do," said Winnie.

Thatch nodded. "After Lockner sold the stocks and put the money in the company account, the police froze the company's assets as part of their murder investigation. Unfortunately,

they didn't realize that some of the money in that account belonged to Lockner's customers and not to his firm."

"You're lucky they did freeze it," commented Winnie, looking at Thatch over the top of her glasses. "Lockner could have cleaned out the account and hightailed it for parts unknown."

"I have more faith in my fellow human than you do," responded Thatch.

Winnie ignored the dig. "Have the police found the murder weapon, or arrested anyone for the killing?"

"No gun and no arrests, but there are plenty of suspects. As you mentioned earlier, some of Lockner's clients suffer from an association with criminal elements. Apparently, Barstow hadn't been doing an accurate job of predicting the market for the last several weeks and quite a few of those shady investors were losing a small part of the profits they had gained earlier."

Winnie stopped knitting. "Barstow lost his touch?"

Thatcher nodded affirmatively. "And in a bull market."

"Bull market?"

"Most stocks were rising in value," replied Thatch, by way of explanation.

Winnie thought for a moment and then resumed knit-

ting. "Hardly a reason to murder the poor man. Anyone else?"

"Edith Barstow, Henry's wife," said Thatch. "Henry had a big life insurance policy, with Edith as sole beneficiary. Five hundred thousand dollars, I understand."

"Now we're getting somewhere."

"The life insurance policy is not the only reason to suspect that Edith Barstow murdered her husband," added Thatch. "Apparently, Henry was having an affair."

Winnie threw him a questioning look.

Thatch responded. "I had gone to the offices to see Charles Lockner and close my investment accounts. Lockner gave me the records of my account and allowed me to use Barstow's office so I could work out for myself the exact amount the company owed me. Shortly after Lockner left me, the secretary, Susan Wilson, slipped quietly into the office and shut the door."

"She explained that she had heard you and I had done some investigative work in the past and wanted us to determine if Edith Barstow had murdered her husband."

"What made her think she might have?"

"Susan Wilson was the woman Henry Barstow had been hav-

ing an affair with for over a month. Two nights before Henry was murdered, he took her to the Stars Bar on Fifty-first Street. You know, that place where they have pictures of all the famous Broadway personalities hanging everywhere. They took a booth by the entrance, where they talked and had a few drinks. About half an hour later, Edith Barstow walked in.

"Susan was fairly certain that Edith spotted her and Henry sitting together, but after a brief look of recognition, Edith appeared to ignore the obviously explosive situation.

"She sat down at the bar. Susan believes she was watching them in the mirror behind the bar."

"Isn't it rather dark in the Stars Bar?" asked Winnie, trying to recall the last time she had visited the place. "Maybe Edith couldn't see them clearly and Susan is suffering from an overactive imagination."

"I asked her the same question," replied Thatch. "Apparently there was a light illuminating a picture behind them. Susan is absolutely positive their faces were clearly visible to anyone sitting at the bar."

Thatch continued. "Out of the corner of her eye, Susan saw Henry Barstow make a gesture

to his wife. It was quite clear that he did not want Susan to see it."

"What sort of gesture?"

Thatcher pointed his thumb over his shoulder. "Sort of like what a hitchhiker would make. Susan feels certain he was signaling his wife to 'get out.' A few seconds later, appearing somewhat confused, Edith got up and left."

"So Susan believes that Edith murdered her husband for having an affair."

"Correct," said Thatch. "However, Edith couldn't have done it."

"According to Charles Lockner, on the evening of the murder Edith asked him to meet her at a local restaurant to solicit his aid in breaking up the affair."

"After they finished their discussion and meal and were about to leave, the police arrived and informed Edith that her husband had been murdered outside the Lockner office building just a short time before."

"So Charles Lockner and Edith Barstow both have alibis," observed Winnie.

Thatch nodded. "The owner of the restaurant and several waitresses confirmed that Lockner and Mrs. Barstow were in the middle of their meal at the time Henry was murdered."

Winnie reflected a moment.



"Do you know whether Edith Barstow ever visited her husband's office?"

"Apparently not," replied Thatch. "It seems she was quite peeved about the great deal of time Henry spent working instead of being at home. According to Lockner, the meeting in the restaurant was the first time he had ever talked to Edith Barstow."

Winnie shook her head slowly. "There's just one thing still troubling me. I wonder why Henry and Susan started an affair in the last few weeks after having worked together for nearly two years?"

"That's simple," replied Thatch. "Miss Wilson was only hired two months ago. Lockner fired the first secretary."

"Why?"

Thatch shrugged.

"That seems odd," said Winnie, thoughtfully. "The previous girl had been with the firm for nearly two years, and all of a sudden Lockner fires her for no apparent reason. Have you been able to talk to the first secretary?"

"A Miss Carlo," said Thatch. "I'm afraid not. Her whereabouts are unknown."

"A rather dour woman, I'm afraid," he added. "Henry never got along very well with her. It seems she had the annoying habit of straightening and

cleaning his office. Consequently, he had difficulty locating his notes and charts."

"Miss Wilson never straightened up anything and was more to Henry's liking . . . in more ways than one, I assume."

"Hmmm. . . . Did you say you were in Barstow's office?"

"Yes."

"Describe it to me."

"Just an office," said Thatch. "Rather in disarray. There were all sorts of calculations—plots, graphs, and the like—scattered about on top of filing cabinets and on the chairs."

"What about the desk?" coached Winnie. "What was on the desk top?"

"That was relatively clear. There was a telephone, a canister full of pens and pencils, a picture, and a calculator."

"Tell me about the picture."

"Just a picture of Edith Barstow in a standard brass frame. Had 'Love, Edith' written on it."

Winnie seemed a little disappointed. She began knitting in earnest for half a minute, then stopped.

"I think I know enough to say who the killer is," she said. "Call Charles Lockner and tell him I know why he fired his first secretary. Have him come over tomorrow afternoon, will you, dear?"

Thatcher sat upright in his

chair. "Lockner? *He* couldn't have murdered Barstow. Besides having an alibi, Lockner would be the last man to want to kill off the primary reason for the success of his business. Besides, what makes you think he'll come here?"

Winnie half smiled and continued knitting. "Why, faith in my fellow human, of course."

Charles Lockner arrived shortly after lunch the following day. He appeared nervous and somewhat angry. Thatcher sat silently in his chair, keeping a careful eye on him.

"What's this nonsense about my first secretary?" asked Lockner, shifting uneasily in his chair.

"Where's Henry Barstow?" asked Winnie, ignoring his question.

Lockner took a moment to look surprised. "He's dead and buried, of course."

"How would you know? You haven't seen him for over two months." Winnie picked up her knitting.

"That's ridiculous."

"Why did you bring in the other man to assume Henry Barstow's identity?" asked Winnie, knitting calmly. "Was it because you were afraid you'd lose your investors if they found out that Henry Barstow, the

genius behind your success, had disappeared? . . . Or were you afraid of what the mob might do to you when they found out Henry had made off with some of their funds?"

Lockner sensed a small triumph. "Barstow didn't disappear. Who do you think his wife just buried?"

"That's a good question," said Winnie, looking up from her knitting. "Who did Edith Barstow bury? It certainly wasn't her husband."

Lockner began to sweat. "I've had about enough of this," he said, rising from his chair. Thatcher was on his feet in an instant.

"Perhaps we should have the police exhume the body," suggested Winnie. "For identification purposes, you know."

Lockner stood silently for a moment and then dropped back into his chair.

"Care to tell us the whole story?" asked Winnie.

"Why don't you? You've been doing such a great job so far," replied Lockner.

"About two months ago, Henry Barstow disappeared, taking with him, I suspect, some of your investors' funds. Edith Barstow got in touch with you and told you that her husband had deserted her.

"When you realized Henry had taken much of the money

entrusted to you by a few of the gangsters you dealt with, you knew you had to do something quickly to save your skin. Probably Edith suggested the solution to you.

"She told you that Henry would probably come back after a while with the money he had stolen. She suggested that you find someone to take her husband's place. She conveniently provided you with some of Henry's old identification cards and photos for your impostor.

"It sounded like a good idea to you. Barstow had worked quietly in his office all alone, avoiding contact with others. No one in the area actually knew what he looked like. If you kept the impostor quietly concealed in Barstow's office until Henry returned with the pilfered funds, you figured no one would be any the wiser.

"Of course, your first secretary would recognize an impostor, so you fired her and hired Susan Wilson. To Susan, the man in Barstow's office was Henry Barstow.

"The problem was, the real Henry Barstow never came back. You tried desperately to reaccumulate the funds needed to replace what Barstow had stolen, but without his investment wisdom, you got deeper and deeper in debt.

"Then last Thursday eve-

ning, while you're having dinner at a restaurant with Edith Barstow, a police official comes up and announces to Edith that her husband has been murdered in the parking lot outside your office building. Of course, only you and Edith realize that the murdered man was an impostor.

"Edith takes you aside and tells you about the five hundred thousand dollar life insurance policy on her husband. She tells you she'll identify the dead impostor as her husband, collect the insurance, and provide you with enough money to cover her husband's theft. The rest is history.

"Edith gives you part of the money, you distribute it amongst your clients' investments, and dissolve the company. You're off the hook, your clients are none the wiser, and Edith has a little nest egg to make up for the paychecks her husband used to bring home. Only the insurance company is slightly poorer.

"Is that the way it happened, Mr. Lockner?"

Lockner was slouched in his chair. "Almost exactly."

"Tell me. Was Henry Barstow's funeral a closed coffin ceremony?"

Lockner sighed deeply. "Yes. Edith has taken the body out of the state for just such a burial."

"I suspected as much . . . you and Edith could hardly have had one of Henry's relatives suddenly popping up and saying that wasn't Henry in the box. . . . I doubt you'll be seeing her anytime soon, by the way.

"I knew you were up to something when you fired a secretary for no apparent reason. That corresponded too closely in time with Henry Barstow's sudden inability to make profitable investments for your company in a rising market to be mere coincidence. I suspected then that Henry had not been on the job."

"I'm amazed that with so few facts to go on you were able to deduce that Edith Barstow and I defrauded the insurance company," said Lockner, the fight seeming to have left him.

"That isn't all I had to go on, but you needn't concern yourself with the clues in this case."

Winnie set her knitting aside. "Mr. Lockner, I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but I'm afraid you're in more trouble than you realize. Unwittingly, you were an accessory to murder."

Lockner bolted upright in his chair. "What?"

"It was Edith Barstow who suggested putting an impostor in Henry's place, wasn't it?"

Terrified, Lockner nodded.

"She probably suggested someone who sounded just like

Henry on the phone, and who would go along with the scheme. Didn't she?"

"Yes . . . yes, she did."

"I thought so. Did she also suggest that you have dinner with her last Thursday night, the night Henry Barstow's impostor was murdered?"

"Yes. She told me she had to tell me something important. When I got to the restaurant, she showed me a suicide letter she had received that morning from her husband, who had been hiding out in Brazil. She said she had checked with authorities there, and an unknown man answering her husband's description had hanged himself in a hotel room a few days before."

"Suicide, of course that's what she'd tell you," said Winnie. "The one thing you'd realize the insurance company wouldn't pay off on. So when Henry's impostor was murdered, Edith told you how lucky you were that some robber had done you both a favor. She would collect the insurance and help you cover the company's debts, no doubt out of some guilty feeling she had about her husband's theft. All you had to do was help identify the body of the impostor as that of Henry Barstow. With your independent identification and hers, the insurance company was sure to pay off."

"Together, you and Edith Barstow fabricated the reason for the meeting in the restaurant. It wasn't to discuss Henry's affair. There was no such affair going on because you both knew the man Susan Wilson was seeing—the impostor—wasn't Henry Barstow."

"You have to understand the predicament I was in," pleaded Lockner, wringing his hands. "The mob . . ."

"I feel for you, Mr. Lockner. You were the pigeon in a deadly scam," said Winnie evenly. "Have you figured it out yet? . . . Why you were conveniently drawn to the restaurant to give Edith an alibi? . . . Who, ultimately, had the most to gain from the impostor's death? Don't you realize who had to have murdered Henry Barstow's impostor?"

Lockner dropped his head into his hands. "Of course. Henry Barstow."

"You got it," agreed Winnie. "Alive, well, and living high with his partner in crime and marriage somewhere over the rainbow. And you can bet it ain't Brazil."

Thatcher phoned the police. When they arrived, they escorted Charles Lockner downtown to read him his rights and take his statement.

"Well, my dear," said Thatcher. "You did it again. When did you

suspect the Barstows were conspirators?"

"When you described that little episode Susan Wilson told you about in the lounge," said Winnie. "First, let's assume for the sake of argument that Susan was sitting with the real Henry Barstow when Edith walked in. Obviously, they saw each other. Does it make any sense that Edith would ignore them?"

"Think about it. Edith knew that the man sitting with Susan Wilson was posing as Henry Barstow. Since she didn't think Susan knew who she was, she decided to pretend to be just another customer in the bar. She saw no reason to cause a scene and play the role of an irate wife who had just caught her husband with another woman, thereby drawing unnecessary attention to herself and the impostor."

"Aha," exclaimed Thatcher, suddenly catching on. "But Susan Wilson did recognize Edith Barstow."

"Precisely," affirmed Winnie. "From the picture in Barstow's office, which Susan Wilson must have seen just from having worked around Lockner Investment for the last two months. Whether the picture of Edith was left in the office by accident or to establish the impostor as her husband is not important.

What is important was that Susan Wilson identified Edith Barstow from having seen her picture.

"When Henry Barstow's impostor made the pointing gesture with his thumb, he wasn't signaling Edith to leave, as Susan assumed. He was trying to point to the picture on the wall behind his head. He wanted Edith to remember that her picture was in Barstow's office and to realize that the secretary would recognize her from it. He wanted Edith to approach and play the role of the irate wife.

"Edith, however, still not making the connection with her picture in the office, misinterpreted the impostor's signal to mean 'get out,' just as Susan did."

"Now I get it," said Thatch, nodding. "The lounge episode, the sudden inability of Henry to perform well, and the change in secretaries convinced you that Henry Barstow hadn't been around for a while."

"Precisely," affirmed Winnie. "And that raised another question. Why didn't Charles Lockner simply dissolve the company when Henry disappeared? He was more than willing to do so once the phony Henry Barstow was killed. The obvious answer

was that he didn't have the funds and was afraid of what his more violent customers might do to him. That, in turn, would lead one to suspect that some money disappeared along with Henry."

"Oh, yes," said Thatcher, clearing his throat. "The money. I guess that means part of the funds I received as profits on my investments was stolen from the insurance company."

Winnie looked up, defiance in her eyes. "Thatch, don't you dare." Her hand went instinctively to her necklace.

"No doubt that money will have to be given back," continued Thatch, unmindful of the possible peril he was generating for himself.

"Don't say it, Thatcher. Please."

Thatch laughed. "Calm yourself, dear. I'm sure most of the money I originally invested is ours. We can easily make up any difference and keep your necklace. I was just having a little fun with you."

Winnie began unraveling her knitting.

"Winnie, what are you doing?"

She smiled. "Just having a little fun of my own. Making your sweater six inches too short."

# The Language of Death

by Jeffry Scott



California is notorious for being a state of mind as much as a state. But Spruceville, a small town that's orderly though not really dull, is just in California without being of it. Up there in timber country they have escaped pollution that comes out of stacks or seeps from ugly minds and natures.

That was why the murder of the Englishman, Yorky Bradlaw, was so appalling. Not that many citizens knew him, there

hadn't been time. Those who did were not fans. What was there to like? He was a guest who abused the laws of hospitality, a bad-mouthed drunk and a rogue to boot. All the same . . .

Spruceville remembers, regrets, resents its murders. There have been less than half a dozen since well before Woodrow Wilson was president. All cleared up within a matter of days. Two months after the strange-talking little Brit was beaten to



death, his killing remained a mystery—adding suspicion to the brutal shock, the affront, of his passing.

Sheriff Patrick Kavanagh took it especially hard. The city PD handled serious crime; he was getting no flak over the case. But Kavanagh, after more than a decade in town, had thought better of Spruceville. And while Yorky Bradlaw hadn't been a friend, Pat Kavanagh understood the guy and even liked him in a grumpy, poker-faced way.

Just because Sheriff Kavanagh fretted and grieved, he was to nail the killer. When he was out of sorts, his wise wife Dolly did something about it. If she hadn't sold him that vacation, prodding him clear across the country for a week or so, Kavanagh's ears never would have been opened to the language of death.

**M**ayor Tom Willow got bright ideas the way some men get irritable or in deep trouble, meaning that it happened constantly and without conscious effort. He knocked himself out creating reasons for people to come to Spruceville and spend a dollar, or fifty. A born promoter, it was his vocation, hobby, and profession.

Spotting Sheriff Kavanagh

on Main Street the afternoon of Yorky Bradlaw's arrival, Willow hustled over. "Guess what, Pat? Landed my first star for the summer school next month... a genuine British man of letters, here of all places! I can't make out a word he says, he's Veddy Briddish, but that's all to the good, huh?"

Tom Willow's euphoria wilted as Kavanagh, grinning sardonically, started shaking his head. That morning the sheriff had taken a call from a certain Caspar Mulock of Beare Community College, twenty miles along the valley, warning of a small storm on the way. Cas Mulock, unkindly though affectionately known to generations of students as Wyatt Burp, was head of security at BCC.

"Your man of letters," Kavanagh guessed, "is called Edgar Bradlaw, aka Yorky Bradlaw, right? Tom, I sure hope you haven't signed any contract with him."

The mayor blushed, replying evasively, "Well, not exactly. Yet. All I've done is give him a special rate." Tom Willow owned the hotel.

"Good," said Kavanagh. "They've just given him the gate at BCC, he was brought over to be writer-in-residence or some such. Maybe he is a writer, he sure writes some fancy rubber checks, Cas Mu-

lock tells me. Bradlaw's a drunk, also."

"Gee," Mayor Willow responded, awed. "I nearly promised him a job all summer, think of that! What can we do about it, Pat?"

"Way Cas Mulock tells it, Bradlaw's residence and work papers depend on his being at BCC. Problem should solve itself soon, he'll have to go home to London or wherever. But I'll talk to the guy."

"Grand," Tom Willow boomed. He wasn't a vengeful man. "Fact is, I'd feel bad about running him out of town the same day I invited him to stick around. Bradlaw *told* me he'd just quit BCC; I should've pinned him down on whose idea that was."

The mayor brightened again, he was always juggling several civic events. "At least we're in great shape for Chess Week. Drama department at BCC is weighing in with a gimmick for the final day's parade." He was already hurrying away—having seen Yorky Bradlaw in the distance.

**T**he Englishman was a bedraggled bantam with thinning, rusty hair for his crest, wicked little snapping eyes, and trembling, nicotine-yellow claws of fingers. Something about him suggested a strut; even when he was standing still.

Talking to him, Sheriff Kavanagh discovered, was easier to promise than perform. Not that Yorky wouldn't talk, quite the reverse—just that he did it so oddly. Kavanagh had pulled embassy duty at Grosvenor Square when in England with the Marines and could understand most Brits, but he'd never met a thicker regional accent.

Soon the sheriff's back ached from leaning over his desk, and he was aware of staring intently at Yorky Bradlaw's lips, like a deaf person. "Slow down," he pleaded at last. "What kind of Cockney talk is that, anyway?"

Bradlaw snorted and tossed his head. "*Cockney?* Blasted impudence! I'm from Yorkshire, the finest county and the grandest place in the benighted United so-called Kingdom." But there was a twinkle in Yorky's eye, and Kavanagh didn't take offense.

Cackling abruptly, Bradlaw explained, "I've heard a lot about Texas and Texans. I'm from the Texas of England. We're the biggest and best and cleverest—at everything. I know chaps I was at school with, working abroad, who take a tin of Yorkshire earth with them so when their wives have babies they can slip it under the bed at the maternity hospital and say their little tyke was born on Yorkshire soil."

He had to repeat the anecdote several times before the sheriff took it in. But gradually Kavanagh got the hang of that accent. Some words were broadened, others twisted, the odd ones clipped in a stammering way that turned "The" into an explosive "*tuh*" sound, to be tacked on the following word.

So when Yorky said, "The college" or "And the rest," they came out as "t'college," "ant' rest."

Bradlaw was frank. Yes, Beare Community College had fired him, one month short of his supposed six months' stint. "Can't blame them, neither. I kept my dish straight for long as I could. . . . It's the drink, see. That and boredom. If I don't drink, I get bored; when I'm bored, I drink a lot."

Meeting the sheriff's calm gaze, Yorky Bradlaw said, "I came to this country on a cut-rate ticket—you've got to nominate the date of return before you've left, and if you come back earlier, you pay extra. I don't like paying extra. Yon mayor chappie says I can have a room for practically nix, and I'd be a right fool not to cash in on that while I sweat out the three weeks till my flight. Right?"

The little fellow bounced off the chair and peered out at Spruceville. "Nice place," he murmured to himself. "I might

even settle down and write something." Sheriff Kavanagh was a beefy, broken-nosed lawman in khakis, but there was more to him than that. He nearly winced at the Englishman's tone. Bradlaw, he could tell, had said that too many times, more or less in supplication; it wouldn't happen, and it was destroying him. That and the drink.

"Just as long as you don't write checks," the sheriff suggested dryly. "Stay out of trouble, and I won't be needing to see you again." It didn't work out that way.

**S**heriff Kavanagh opened the cell door. "Up and at 'em, Yorky," he roared unfeelingly. Bradlaw wallowed out from under the blanket, a stubbled, bloodshot, horrible spectacle. Kavanagh passed him a mug of black coffee and a doughnut. "You did it again," he said.

Yorky Bradlaw dropped the doughnut on the floor and gingerly sipped the coffee. "Persecution," he said thickly.

"Protection," Kavanagh corrected. "Listen, they roll the sidewalks up here at ten thirty, and people want to sleep. They don't want some lunatic at large on Main, bayin' at the moon and calling them rebellious colonists and wicked ingrates."

"I never did that," Yorky pro-

tested, adding instantly, "I bet I did. There's wisps of memory, I won a prize for public speaking at school, the All-Yorkshire Shield. But there was no call to clap me in jail."

Sheriff Kavanagh stood over him. "If Deputy Fee hadn't walked you in here to sleep it off, somebody would have got out of bed and busted you in the snoot. Syd Fee's a good kid, I don't hire the other kind. Thank your lucky stars because you gave him a hard time and he took it. Some towns, some cops, it wouldn't be room service; you'd be counting your fractures."

Yorky laughed uneasily, fine ripples marring the inky surface of the coffee from his shaking. "It's not funny," Kavanagh snapped. "You've had rope, Bradlaw. Next time you disturb the peace will be the last time. I'll drive you down there to LAX and heave you aboard the first London-bound airplane."

The sheriff very much doubted whether he had the authority to do that.

"Maybe you ought to," Yorky Bradlaw countered, wistful and not defiant. Later the remark haunted Sheriff Kavanagh, the dead man repeating it in his dreams. But then Yorky forced down another gulp of coffee, shuddered all the way to his toes, and husked, "Just kid-

ding, mate. Cheer up, boss, only another ten days to go. . . ."

The same day, Mayor Willow clicked his tongue and wagged his head and asked, "Should I tell my hotel people to send him on his way, Pat?"

Kavanagh, thumbs in his belt, pondered on that. "No," he decided at last. "I've seen that air ticket of his, Bradlaw isn't lying. Run him out of town and he'll drift down to LA to wait for his flight, and there they'll chew him up and spit him out. We'll keep an eye on Mr. Yorky. Truth to tell, Tom, he gives my deputies something to do at night, every so often. No real harm in him. But he does rile folks, once they understand what the heck he's laying on them in the way of abuse."

**Y**ou had to agree that in its modestly ambitious way, the wind-up to Spruceville Chess Week was a doozy.

The parade assembled at JFK Mall where the river widens, shallows, starts chuckling among boulders it turns to wet silver and generally stops behaving like the untamed beast of a few miles upstream. Mayor Willow led off in his elderly but pristine white Caddy drophead. Ms. Chess Week—that foxy blonde from Micky's Sport & Camera—standing up in the

back, displaying her sash, paste tiara, and this and that.

Followed by the town band and the American Legion party and Herb Loring's tow truck, chrome glittering, tired bunting trying to flutter. Herb's being deaf, his tape deck was louder than the band and far too close behind. But he sulked if not allowed to join such events.

Thus far, par for the Spruceville course.

But then came the chess pieces, Beare Community College's contribution. They were outstanding: brick-clad walking castles, stately bishops, fierce jousters with plumed helmets and armor looking solidly authentic for thin plastic, queenly queens and kingly kings. Plus a horde of pawns, comic Munchkin lookalikes pelting kids with candy and their parents with rice or the occasional shaving-foam custard pie.

After a few blocks the parade began straggling. Some of those costumes were taller than the wearers and Kavanagh noticed a towering queen in distress—evidently her eye-holes had twisted round—before a pawn scampered to her aid. Applause helped the marchers along, though.

Sheriff Kavanagh fell into step beside Tom Willow's car during the return to the mall.

"You ain't seen nothin' yet," Willow chortled. "Good old BCC, best parade we've ever had."

The mall's stores were a U-shaped array with the river visible through pillars and beyond the supermarket parking lot at the far end. In the middle lay a smoothly tiled yard.

After much jostling and confusion, deputies and Chamber of Commerce marshals edging the five hundred or so throng back against the store windows, a squad of youngsters in BCC sweatshirts got busy with black masking tape, marking out a giant chessboard on the tiles.

Two by two, the costumed paraders appeared from the parking lot where the march had ended, forming opposing ranks at each end of the board until it was set with living pieces. The PA system pinged and whined, Mayor Willow brandished the mike and announced that the game would begin in five minutes.

Coached by his brightest aide, the mayor played the Russian grand master who'd been star of Chess Week—a recent defector, the poor man would trek anywhere to sell his quickie paperback biography. Moves echoed from the mall's speakers and almost uncannily, nominated pieces obeyed the instructions.

It was picturesque, but shadows were lengthening and it had been a long day. Children grew restive, adults who didn't know chess from tic-tac-toe exchanged loud misinformation and speculation. Yorky Bradlaw, an ominous, bulky brown-bagged bottle peeping from his corduroy jacket, heckled throughout. "Ridiculous," he kept crowing, rivalling the PA system. "Re-bloody-dikkulus! You in the funny hat—" (it came out as *foony 'at*)—"you're rubbish, you haven't a clue, get that bishop off his backside and moving, you idiot!" And more besides.

Sheriff Kavanagh moved through the spectators—far more easily than he could have done half an hour earlier, since people were drifting off as the novelty of living chess palled—and tapped the Englishman's shoulder. "Pipe down."

Yorky grumbled. "Just having a bit of fun." He edged away, tapping a vaguely nubile pawn's rump as he went by. "Checkmate me any time, darling." Kavanagh scowled, but Yorky Bradlaw had lowered his voice, was behaving himself. Sort of...

And out on the parking lot—the sheriff was tall enough to see over most heads—two cars had locked bumpers and their drivers were locking horns.

He headed for them, damped the argument, untangled the cars.

The chess match ended in its arranged draw, Mayor Willow shook hands with the defector, a camera flashed. The pieces, wriggling out of or unlatching sections of costumes, trooped across the tiles to where yellow buses with BCC logos were waiting. A harrassed woman in plaid skirt and green eyeshade called, "Whatever you do, return the costumes to the truck. The buses leave in an hour and we won't wait!"

Kids, Kavanagh thought indulgently.

**D**eputy Syd Fee took a pass by JFK mall, always closed and deserted at ten P.M., because the parking lot was a favorite place for joyriders to dump "borrowed" vehicles.

The lot was empty, but the scything beam of his spotlight showed some garbage, maybe a black plastic sack, thrown down towards the middle. A red light that might have been an ember ignited momentarily in the beam. Fee didn't know that Yorky Bradlaw secured his bandanna with an antique ring gathering it at the throat, stone reflecting the light.

Methodically checking torch, cuffs, pistol, Fee left the car to

investigate. The invisible river made a chilly, liquid rustle in the darkness. His only thought was that the garbage might be smoldering.

The closer he got, torch beam merciless, the more Syd Fee knew he ought to hurry and the slower he went. Unconsciously, as his heart thudded and his gorge rose, he was whimpering.

He failed to recognize Yorky Bradlaw. It was hard to place the wreckage as human, let alone give it a personal identity. "Jesus," Deputy Fee cried, dropping to one knee—and leaf-vein patterns of leaking blood altered course as the vilely battered head stirred.

Compassion overcoming panic, rejection, revulsion, Syd Fee cradled the dying man. "What happened? Who did this?" Sickly, from the corner of his eye, Fee registered a scraped hand like a bundle of snapped twigs, fingers at impossible angles, a glimpse of bone . . .

"It was tonight," Yorky Bradlaw whispered.

Then he died.

"This is terrible, just terrible," Doc Henry mumbled, face greasily sweaty in the car lights.

Sheriff Kavanagh, helping the older man to his feet, said, "Sorry to hit you with it, but I got to know if he's dead, it has to be done. City PD's on their

way, they'll handle the rest."

Doc Henry looked puzzled for an instant. "No," he said, "he's a sorry sight, but I saw worse in the war. I mean you've got a bad one out there." He jerked his long jaw at the night.

"Somebody sure lost their temper," Kavanagh agreed bleakly.

Doc Henry scowled and shook his head. "No, sir. The red mist, sorry, it all went blank, then there was the missus had the kindling axe in her head"? Not hardly."

Doc Henry went on. "The victim was attacked and disabled, there was a pause, he was beaten again. Maybe over and over. Fits of rage don't go that way. This was somebody enjoying every moment, making it last. City fellers will say the same when they've had him on the slab. I'm no fancy pathologist, but I've cracked the books out of interest. Hell of a world, Pat. Sure he's dead, now I'm going back to bed."

**W**eeks later, Dolly Kavanagh made her move. She was a big woman, still shapely.

It was a measure of their love that she still looked the same to Patrick Kavanagh as when they'd started dating in the 1960's.

He'd stopped watching TV



without seeing it, rising to mutter, "Take a turn round town, you go on up when you're ready, if I'm late I'll sleep in the den."

Dolly, aware that he would drive to the mall's parking lot and sit brooding there by the hour, said, "You can't do any more. The city police had a fire lit under them by the British embassy and the stories in the paper, and they struck out. Why blame yourself when they can't hack it?"

It was as if she hadn't spoken. "Syd Fee's never been the same since. But he's certain what Yorky said. Why the hell would anyone tell Syd the only thing *didn't* need telling? Of course it 'was tonight,' it had just happened!"

Willing patience, Dolly said, "The city detectives worked that out. Figured Yorky had been given until next day to get out of town, but whoever threatened him, jumped the gun on that deadline. 'It was tonight,' meaning he thought he'd had more time."

"Maybe." He wasn't convinced, the single word had undertones of frustration.

Without looking at her husband, Dolly Kavanagh said, "I've never been a gimme lady, Patrick, I don't ask for things. Just this once, I'm asking. Norm and Irene want us to go visit. Norm's bought them this summer place at Cape Cod, nothing fancy,

Irene says its a glorified cabin by the dunes, you can dig your own clams . . .

"Please. Tom Willow's going to order you to take a vacation anyway, before you crack up. He's told me. We haven't been to New England in years, the last time Irene and I got together was Thanksgiving before last."

Kavanagh's forehead creased. She held her breath. "Seems I'm outnumbered," he remarked sourly. "When d'you want to go?"

The morning they left, Sheriff Kavanagh was in his garage, looking for cheese. It made no sense but he was in there and Dolly had hollered from upstairs. Did he see the cheese?

Finally he went back indoors to ask what in tarnation she was talking about.

Dolly looked blank before giggling helplessly. "What would cheese be doing in the garage?"

"I wondered myself."

"Keys, Patrick. I said do you need the keys. For the trunk." It wasn't all that funny, but they laughed together, Dolly because she was hearing a sound that had been absent too long.

**I**t was a fine vacation if you liked seafood and sand in the bed. Dolly's sister Irene was a riot but only in meas-

ured doses; luckily, husband Norm seemed to think the same way, unobtrusively good at leaving the sisters talking while he and Kavanagh fished or just sat, pretending to.

On the last day the beach was packed. Norm and Irene had gone to P-town, buying belated postcards and some more souvenir T-shirts. Dolly drowsing beside him, Kavanagh leaned back on his elbows, squinting into the sun dazzle and thinking of nothing in particular.

Behind, a group of teenagers had set up base camp on blankets and were teasing, flirting, conspiring. From their pallid skins, this was their first day. Good to be that age, at the start of a vacation, Kavanagh mused idly.

The mood changed with no warning. A boy came charging up from the edge of the sea, knees pumping, the picture of grotesque flight. One hand was clamped across his face above the nose, the other groping blindly. "Eyes," he howled. "Gimme eyes here!"

Heads were turning, a child sobbed. Fearing some grotesque accident—his cousin had nearly lost an eye when they were kids, diving into the creek behind the sawmill and hitting a drowned branch—Kavanagh went cold.

He half rose, but the boy vaulted recumbent Dolly to fling

himself down with the other teenagers. Kavanagh craned round, wakening his wife, in time to see the youth scrabbling in a cooler and tossing ice cubes into his mouth. "Better," the boy announced indistinctly, "I was burning up."

Sheriff Kavanagh, relieved and nettled as one tends to be after a false alarm, felt foolish. Of course. Not "eyes" but ice. The kid had been clowning about terminal heat and thirst.

Suddenly Kavanagh experienced the weirdest sensation: insight, startlement, a touch of vertigo. Yorky Bradlaw's accent. Cheese in the garage. Ice.

Happy couples sometimes share a form of ESP. Dolly Kavanagh, about to lie back, changed her mind and clasped his arm. "What?"

"It's okay, sweetheart, I'm fine. Two languages . . . and it was Chess Week, dammit." Calming, he smiled at her. "We all speak two languages, it just hit me."

Uncertain whether he was serious, she joked, "Not me, mister. French, Spanish, German, all Greek to me."

He wasn't listening. "Two languages. What anyone says, and what we hear. Like us, keys for cheese. And that kid there, ice and eyes. But the zinger's when the word alters but it still seems to make some kind of sense."

"Yorky wasn't talking about *tonight* and he never said it, no sir. That was just what Syd Fee heard. Yorky was using up his last bit of life to say who killed him." The sheriff paused. "Correction, not who, Yorky didn't know the name. But he knew what the killer was, and said so.

"I should have seen it right off. The crazy way he spoke, that Yorkshire accent. Americans don't always sound the 'e' in 'the,' we say sometimes 'thuh.' Yorky, he cut it right to the bone... like, 'T' cat sat ont' mat.' Yes, indeedy, and it was Chess Week, too...."

Dolly's face hardened, she sighed, "This vacation was for forgetting. Don't start over."

"Start, hell, now I can finish it." He patted her shoulder. "Bear with me, you'll see what I'm driving at. Quick, what's the opposite of day?"

"Night."

"And the guy in armor on a horse, rescues damsels, slays dragons?"

"Uh, knight. Patrick, this is dumb—" Belatedly she heard herself saying "knight," and her eyes widened.

Kavanagh, looking ten years younger, nodded. "Sure, only difference between night and knight is that silent 'k.' Yorky Bradlaw did his best. 'It was the knight.' Knights in Spruceville? Get out of here... but

there were. Chess Week, so there were four knights around, chessmen, in the parade and that game after, on the mall."

"I made the call, they're on their way," Caspar Mulock greeted the sheriff outside the dean's office where Kavanagh had parked his jeep. "Done your legwork also, son."

The BCC security chief was pear-shaped, deceptively wimpish looking. He dressed like a hotel dick in some bygone black and white movie, wore rimless spectacles and was not only a former cop but shrewd enough for two of them.

"Follow me," Cas Mulock said, "he'll be out on the lawns this time of day. No sweat, Pat, this place may come on like a country club but my crew keeps tabs on it; nobody's sneaking off.

"Like you were saying last night, there were four knights in that chess stunt, all from here. Two of them came back on a bus and the third one drove it. Didn't leave Spruceville till seven P.M. that night and stopped on the way for beer 'n' burgers at the Mountain House, rolled in around nine thirty P.M., so those three you can scratch."

"But some chessmen stayed behind."

Mulock smiled and rolled an eye. "Chesspersons, son. Male and female. Sure, five or six had

personal transportation and that was a Saturday, no classes next day. We don't have curfew here, it's a free country."

The smile deepened. "Guess you're not interested in the fourth knight, cuz."

"Give," said Sheriff Kavanagh.

"Gladly. Brian Anders, rides a BMW cycle, so he didn't need the bus." Going off at what might have been a tangent, Cas Mulock ruminated, "We've never been much for hazing and rough stuff here. Oh, horsin' around and a clumsy young dummy breaks his arm, sure."

The security chief broke off to steer Kavanagh around the corner of BCC's oldest building, a red brick armory converted into a theater. Leaving the flagstone path, they padded across well mown grass islanded with shrubs and weeping willows.

"Never been much for hazing," Cas Mulock resumed, "and there's still none. Officially. Only a lot of accident-prone young people are turning up at the medical center, Pat. Burns, sprains, contusions."

The sheriff halted, head cocked questioningly. "Brian Anders," Mulock confirmed. "Well, him and his crowd, but it's all him. You want him for that murder, I just want him out of here."

Mulock's tone didn't alter as he added, "There's Anders now,

by the fountain with the girl. Wait for him to make us. Feast your eyes."

Brian Anders was a nondescript enough youth at first glance, in jeans, sweater, a black leather jacket. Sheriff Kavanagh sized him up, realizing that the boy's sandy head wasn't really narrow and rather small but his shoulders wide. A powerful build.

"Works out plenty," Mulock put in, guessing the thought. "Not all of his punchbags are in the gym is what I'm saying. The girl's Betty Craine, they're an item. Wouldn't you say she looks kinda peaky and nervy? Word is, Brian has no secrets from her. Meaning he needs to brag. Come to it, she'll bring him down."

Kavanagh murmured, "All I have is what Yorky Bradlaw said. What I *think* he said. And the boy likes hurting people. Yorky was cracking wise all through that chess game. Anders would have left his cycle on the mall parking lot where the parade assembled. Okay, he goes back later, maybe after a few beers, Yorky's still around—Yorky could sleep it off anywhere—sees the kid, starts working his mouth again. . . . It's thin, Cas."

"We'll see. Let's go, son."

Brian Anders, looking up from intent conversation, had spotted Mulock's prissy suit and

Sheriff Kavanagh's khakis and badge. Anders rapped something low-voiced and urgent to Betty Craine. The girl fled, casting a single anguished look over her shoulder. Adrenaline jolted through the sheriff.

"It's Wyatt Burp," Anders exclaimed. "Want my autograph, Wyatt?" But he couldn't take his eyes off Kavanagh. Caspar Mulock, blandly patient, said nothing.

Anders' throat pulsed, his fist clenched and then the fingers uncurled. He smiled tentatively. "What is this?"

Kavanagh said, "City police will be here soon. They'll read you your rights. Questions, Brian, a lot of questions. The way you beat on Yorky Bradlaw, there must have been blood. One speck, and it's the right group, on your clothes, on that cycle, you're through."

"He's through anyway, Pat." Mulock spoke as if the boy wasn't there. "Read his face. He didn't clean up right, he told it all to the girl, his kind has to brag."

"You're crazy," Anders said.

"Betty won't—" His lips shut wetly, he glared and shook his head.

"Save it," Sheriff Kavanagh advised. "Get a lawyer, see how long you can tough it out. Me, I just wanted a look at you. Personal satisfaction, so I can always tell myself I brought you in, mister."

An unmarked car that Kavanagh recognized, with a city PD cruiser behind, pulled up on the asphalt road beside the grassy area. "Here they come, Brian," Cas Mulock said softly.

For a heartbeat they expected him to run. But Anders took a deep breath and when the bowed head rose again, his expression was masklike. "It won't stick," he said, and set off towards the police cars.

"Famous last words," Mulock observed cheerfully.

Sheriff Kavanagh, thumbs in his belt, thought: *It was the knight*. Brian Anders didn't look at all knightly as he trudged away. What he did look was defeated.

Being human, that made Kavanagh feel real good.

# Where Are You Now, Melinda?

by Esther J. Holt



*Illustration by Janet Aulisio*

The old barn heated up the spring night for hours, and when the ashes had cooled so they could investigate the cause, they found the body. It was mine. Doc Haliday said so. He was the town dentist and the local jokesters called him Doc Holiday. He'd been there three years and competed with me for the women. We weren't friends, so I imagine he didn't mind identifying me.

There'd always been hard feelings between me and John Scatters, so right off everyone figured he'd done me in. But then they all listened when the old man yelled that he wouldn't have fired his own barn just to get rid of me.

Old John claimed I robbed him and went to fire the barn but was caught in my own mischief. He even let the sheriff search the place for the thousands of dollars he'd never put in the bank. He hadn't made it from farming. Who does any more? A strange man, he wheeled and dealt on the market and kept the profits in cash and negotiable bonds somewhere on the place. Melinda had told me once. She trusted me then.

The money was gone. But then so was Melinda. We'd been high school sweethearts until the old man decided I wasn't going to amount to anything.

He knew me for what I was and made her break it off. She did see me now and then on the sly, but she was always scared to death.

The authorities decided I must have done away with her before I did myself in. Maybe she caught me robbing her daddy and threatened to yell for help. They went through the ashes again and then over the whole farm. Since the cows had been spending the nights in the pasture, away from the barn, the only bones they found were mine. Even the dozen dogs and cats had escaped.

I kind of hovered around listening to all their wild ideas. It was funny.

You see, I thought when you died you were dead. They had declared me dead and I was still listening to them.

It turned out, when they didn't find any trace of Melinda, that people went back to thinking old John had done away with me. There wasn't enough left of the body for them to say what had been done to it. As for Melinda, they figured that in all the excitement she grabbed the money and ran. They never asked how she got away so fast without her car. All the firemen remembered was that she hadn't offered any sandwiches and coffee.

There'd been rumors for some



time that she'd been meeting someone on the sly. Folks figured it was me. Only I and whoever she was meeting knew it wasn't me. But none of the men left town that whole summer unless it was on vacation. They all came back.

When you're dead, people either pick your bones clean or they make a saint out of you.

It didn't matter any more that I'd cheated them a little in my garage and used car sales. Saying I'd given their cars a complete overhaul when sometimes all I did was give the engine a little cleaning. And if I could pump the gas myself, I'd get a few more cents than the pump said. It all added up. Let's not mention the used cars or where they came from.

Suddenly I was a good old boy whose only fault was loving the wrong woman. If Scatters had let us alone, I'd be alive and Melinda and I'd be married with a couple of kids. I became the squarest-dealing garage owner in the county. And did I know cars. No one could fix cars like good old Harry Bevins.

And kind? No one went out of his way more than Harry Bevins. The man who passed the hat for anyone in sudden need of his neighbors' help, no matter what the need. He took over the Scouts when no one else would. And then I was

stuck with it, even after I found out there wasn't enough money to skim. Good old Harry.

When I got tired of listening to people polishing my halo, I'd ease out of town and go up to the little house my dad had built when he'd thought he wanted to start a farm. He'd managed to buy up a few acres with a nice woodlot, but before his G.I. loan went through, Scatters had bought all the other land around.

The cottage wasn't a bad place, a little primitive, maybe, but the folks had lived in it before Dad gave up his dream and opened the garage. The kitchen and living room were together with a coal burning cookstove to keep them warm. In the back part were a bedroom and a washing room. All the plumbing was back there, with the toilet about thirty steps from the back door. I still used Mom's old kerosene lamps.

I'd met Melinda there several times, but nothing happened but a lot of clutching and hot kissing. Every time I tried for more it was like she could look over my shoulder and see her old man and my mother. I didn't stand a chance against their Bible thumping and yelling about the sins of the flesh. I sometimes wondered how Melinda or I either one had been conceived. I was sure her mother

had died of the shock of what she'd had to do.

I'd always kept the place well stocked just like my dad had. They used to go up there and talk about how it would have been if it hadn't been for Scatters. Then when they died in the flood over at Liftton I took to using the cottage as my own hideaway. I liked the woods but I never thought of how it might have been. Farming wasn't what I'd wanted to inherit.

I did take more girls than just Melinda there—after she'd caved in to what her old man wanted. I always made sure there was plenty of food. It was a cheap date, usually with good results. One thing I'd noticed in all the talk about me was that none of the matrons even mentioned the sweet memories I gave them to think on at night when they lay beside their husbands.

When I got tired of the wind blowing through the trees, I'd wander back to town to listen some more. I almost laughed when I heard old Bill Nolderson say sometimes it felt as if good old Harry was still around.

I heard that they'd found a will that said that since I had no family, I wanted everything I had sold and the money to go to the Scouts and my church. My mother had always dragged me to church, but when I fig-

ured out how to skim the offerings, I went on my own. When they opened my savings account, people were sure surprised at the amount I'd managed to collect. For a while there I thought they were going to put up a statue of me in the park.

What I couldn't figure out was who made out that will. I'd never planned to die so young so I sure hadn't needed that will. It was typed, with my signature across the bottom. I wondered who the forger was. Half the people in town must have my scrawl on a receipt from the garage.

Nothing was done about old John Scatters. He just went on living in his big farmhouse, gathering more money. Nothing was done to anyone about my death. Not once they decided the fire started in the fusebox.

They didn't even look for Melinda. I guess the sheriff didn't want to embarrass the biggest landowner around by dragging his daughter back to face a trial for grand theft or something.

Then it struck me. The cottage hadn't been listed with my belongings. It wasn't in the will to be sold with everything else or people would have been up to look it over. The deed was in a tin box along with the deeds

to the house my parents had lived in and the garage. I had an apartment over the garage and rented the house out. Who went in there before the law did, I wondered.

Melinda was free and I was free, but there was no way we could ever get together now. Too bad. I'd really loved that girl. Now, of course, I felt nothing. That was the strange part. I didn't even hate Scatters. Being all alone with his conscience like he was, he was past everyone's hate. I didn't need to go see him creeping around in his loneliness, if not for Melinda then for all that money, to know he was more alone than I was.

I was beginning to lose my place as center of attention and was wondering how to move on. I hadn't expected to stay in one place for so long—once I was free of everything in my life. Here it was fall already. I had to do something.

I was hanging around in the woods thinking about what was in store for me when the sound of a smooth-running engine sent me skittering behind a tree. To me it meant just one thing. The person who'd turned me into a saint by giving away everything I owned was coming.

I knew he couldn't see me there in the shade, but I took my time getting out far enough

to see him. It was Doc Haliday in a plain shirt, boots, and jeans, not his usual natty self. He looked like a different person, which somehow didn't seem right. I watched him unlock the front door and go in. After a few minutes he was back out.

"Okay, Harry, I know you're watching. Come on out." He looked straight at the tree I was behind. I stayed where I was. "Come on, Harry. I'm the one who identified you, remember."

I came out and strolled toward him. Suddenly I was jarred into feeling again when my brain started turning over faster than the odometers I'd turned back.

"What's on your mind, Doc?"

"A lot, Harry, a great lot. Let's go inside. How've you managed without heat, now that the nights are getting colder?" He let me go ahead. "I come up this way now and then, and I've never spotted any smoke or light."

"I have propane. And I haven't needed lights much."

He was going to play a slow game and I wasn't going to help him by scaring myself to death.

"So that's why the Olsens' propane disappears from their camp from time to time. Let's have some coffee while we talk." He was calling the shots and making sure to let me know it from the beginning. He sat down

at the old kitchen table.

"I think I have to open a new jar. Hope you like instant with no cream. Just sugar." I put the water on the heat and sat across from him. "Why did you say that was me so fast? Didn't you think I might step out of the crowd and make you look stupid?"

"It suited me to identify you, and I knew you wouldn't be coming around. You had all his money. You could just keep on going. Where did you get the bones?"

I got up to make the coffee. The first cup finished the old jar and I gave it to him. When he put sugar in it, I put sugar in mine, even though I don't like sugar. Once he saw me drinking mine, he drank his.

"I found them in the woods. I don't know how long they'd been there or who they might have been. No one around here has disappeared, so I guessed it must have been an outsider."

"Funny." His amusement struck me as strange until I realized he knew exactly who the bones belonged to and how they got there. But he'd never tell me.

"Where's Melinda?" I asked.

My question didn't throw him.

"In Chicago. After I've sold this place to Scatters, I'm going to meet her."

"He never told me he wanted it."

"He didn't want to give you anything, especially his money. I just came by to get what you took that night and then I'll be on my way." His bigheaded idea that he could just walk in and take over was blowing me away. I had to slow him down, if only for my own pleasure.

"Did I sell you this place?"

"I have the deed. Where's the money, buried in the woods?"

"Is that where Scatters had it?" I couldn't raise only one eyebrow, but I tried it.

"What the hell do you mean by that?" He got all goggle-eyed. "You should know where he had it."

"No, I shouldn't. I was looking for it. Melinda hinted that he kept it in the old springhouse. I fired the barn to distract him and went looking for it. It wasn't there. There was a crock lined with a plastic bag where it could have been, but it was gone."

"It couldn't have been gone. Only Melinda and the old man knew, and I know he'd never feed it all back into the market." It was funny watching him lose his cool.

"I'll bet you knew. You're the one mousy Melinda was meeting, but everyone thought it was me."

He got hold of himself too fast to suit me.

"Why did you put the skeleton in the barn?"

"So people would think Scatters'd killed someone and get hanged. Except the way the law is now, he wouldn't. Then I'd have a clear shot with Melinda. But I'll bet my last can of stew I'd have had to get rid of you, too. Where is she? Where's she staying in Chicago?"

"Since you're dead, I don't have to tell you," he sneered. "We won't be needing any ghosts hanging around. By the way, why *are* you hanging around?"

"Maybe I wanted to be at my own funeral like Tom and Huck. How did Melinda pick the night I burned the barn to take off? She's waited all these years."

"She decided it was a good time to get all the money. Only it was gone. I kept her at my place a few days and then took her to the city to catch a bus for Chicago. I think old John was too embarrassed to have people looking for her."

"They said none of her clothes were missing. Did she take anything at all?" I was having trouble keeping from laughing in his face.

"Just a small bag of some personal things she said the old man didn't know about. Why?"

"I was wondering if she took any of the things I gave her. You know, I have a better right than you to meet her." I leaned back in my chair to show him how relaxed I felt, that he wasn't scaring me. "She was mine first."

"You can't meet her. You're dead." He enjoyed sneering.

"And you're the one who said so. You're also the one who made up the will and got the deed to this place. You could afford to give up everything but the land because it's worth the most. Me, I can always come back after I've gotten over amnesia. It's done all the time. I was alone in my garage and I either fell or someone hit me from behind. I came to myself in some city and came straight on home." My hair had grown long and bushy enough in the time I'd been hiding out that I could pass for a crazy, all right.

I was feeling like the cock of the walk until he reached behind his back and held the gun just above the edge of the table. When that little round eye stares at you, you feel the chill of death, I don't care who you are.

"Yeah, I'm sure you could pull it off, all right. That will you left puts you right up there with St. Francis. But you're not coming back." His sneer had even more stuff in it, like Bogart's. "Come on. I don't want to have to drag you out and leave a mess to clean up."

Since he had the gun so steady, I decided there wasn't much point in squabbling. But I wasn't going to let him see I was scared. No, sir, I was going to my grave like an officer and

a gentleman, of which I'd never been either.

We ambled off toward the woods. I felt like something ought to be said but didn't know what, so I kept my mouth shut. I sure wasn't going to crawl and beg. Not when he already thought he was winning.

Then it hit me for sure. I had to stop walking to have him hear me over the sound of dry leaves.

"Has Melinda called you yet?"

"Not yet. She said it was too risky."

"Where's the risk? A call from a telephone booth to a private number? Who's to know?" It was almost funny.

"It's just better this way."

"Better for who?" I swung around and the gun came up toward my head. I ducked. It was too soon.

"Both of us." But the question was there in his face, my rival ladykiller. Had he been had by a mere mouse of a woman? "Turn back around."

"Oka-ay." I'd seen something else in his face, too. "How far are we going? The woods aren't all that deep."

"You'll know when it's about the middle. Stop there. Want a last smoke or something?" He sounded funny.

"What, you'd let me have a lighted cigarette and risk getting caught in a woods fire? Can

I turn around now? I'd like to be sitting peacefully against one of my trees when it happens. Okay?" Without waiting for an answer, I sat down in the noisy leaves with my back against a big old oak tree. "How much longer do I have to wait? You've about talked me to death now."

"You still haven't told me where the money is."

"Oh, I think I have. You just don't want to believe it."

"Well, I know you didn't let it burn with the barn but—"

His face seemed to curl up like the dying leaves, and he went to his knees. I could have jumped him then, but the gun never wavered. His free hand clutched at his middle, and his pain-filled eyes hated me.

"We drank the same coffee," he groaned.

"No. I said I had to open a new jar. I had an old jar ready for an emergency. Like this one. I got the stuff at that new self-service hardware. It said on the box that it's slow acting enough to give the rats and mice time to get outside before they keel over." I started to get up.

"Stay put!" By now the gun was shaking, and that was even scarier than when he held it steady. I stayed put. "Well, old friend, if I don't know where Melinda is, you don't, either."

"Oh, I think I do. And it isn't Chicago. She used to talk about Seattle. As far from the old man as she could get and have the culture and entertainment she wanted. New York or Chicago is too close. I think I'll start in Seattle."

The minute I said that, I knew it was a big mistake. The gun stopped shaking, and that little round eye stared straight at my chest.

Just when I had a picture of my mother coming at me clutching the family Bible against the bosom of her favorite starched Sunday dress, the gun jerked and fell out of his hand.

Talk about letdowns! There I was half dead with fright, and

Doc Haliday was staring at me with dead eyes.

It took a long time for my brain to start working, but it finally did and I realized I was home free. I could have yelled loud enough to raise an echo at the thought of it.

I was dead. Doc Haliday said so. Now he was dead, for real. All I had to do was get rid of any sign I'd been there recently and take off across country. People are going to wonder about Doc Haliday for a very long time.

As for Melinda. Like I said, I'm going to start in Seattle. It'll be your choice, doll. Either me and the money or nothing. Maybe the sight of me back from the dead will do the trick.

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### **SOLUTION TO THE JANUARY "UNSOLVED":**

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Evidently for any system of bridges there must be twice as many ends as there are bridges, that is, the number of bridge ends must be even. But according to the account given in the problem, the number of bridge ends is  $4 \times 4$  plus  $3 \times 3$  plus  $2 \times 2$  plus  $1 \times 1$ , plus 5 more for the ends of the bridges that reach the mainland. The total number of ends is thus 35, an odd number and hence impossible.



FICTION

# The Get-Togethers

by Gary Alexander



THOMPSON/85

Illustration by George Thompson

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**T**his is our thirteenth annual get-together on Lake Seymour, Marv and me and Jim. I'm going to tell you why it's our last.

Lake Seymour is located in southeastern British Columbia. It's H-shaped and huge. Each arm is over fifty miles long. There's a small town and a marina at the south end of one arm. That's where we rent our houseboat, which is the only way to enjoy the lake for any length of time. There are damn few roads around Seymour, and the campgrounds maintained by the provincial government aren't accessible by any of them. An hour out of the marina and you're as far from civilization as you can be, unless you want to go to Alaska or the Yukon or Timbuktu.

We always do it in the first week of August. That's when you have the best odds of decent weather. No guarantees, though. Storms come out of nowhere and really knock the tub around. They end just as fast. Twenty minutes later you've got blue sky. It's like a tropical monsoon, only not so warm. It reminds us of 'Nam, Marv and me and Jim. That's where we met.

The houseboats are pretty nice. They have kitchens, johns, and enough sleeping space for three or more. That is, if you

fold up the dinette and pull out the sofa.

We come up here for a lot of reasons. Fishing is one. Marv and me, we've both fished since we were kids. We got Jim interested when we began the get-togethers. He's a lukewarm angler, though. You can tell. He doesn't much care if we get skunked or not.

The beauty and the isolation are factors, too. We can spend a week in your basic unspoiled wilderness and have our comforts besides.

You're probably thinking the main reason is friendship and camaraderie and all that jazz. Old war buddies and what not? No way. We live within a hundred and fifty miles of each other, but we don't socialize the rest of the year. We don't even talk on the phone except to arrange the trips. We have damn little in common. And, hell, if the truth's to be known, we don't much like one another.

Me, I'm from Seattle. Used to own a filling station until the last so-called energy crisis did me in. I went to work for a Chevy garage. Guess I'll be there until I retire or they carry me out of the shop. I've got a good marriage, the second. Don't have the nightmares so often any more, the sweating screamers that drove my ex half-bananas. I have more of them

during the week at Seymour than the rest of the year combined. Being with the guys brings the bad memories to the surface, I suppose. They don't say anything. They understand.

Marv's from Yakima, in eastern Washington. He's a salesman. Seems like every year he has a different job. Last August, it was storm windows. But don't worry about Marv. He's got a fast mouth. He could sell elevator shoes to Moses Malone. When he's off the sauce.

Jim lives in Portland, Oregon. He's an attorney. He was the college boy in our platoon. After his discharge, he enrolled in law school. He works for a big firm and makes nice bucks. Last couple of years, he's been talking about running for office. City council or something like that. I wouldn't lay any money against him if he goes ahead and does it.

Okay, time to get a piece of business behind us: the real reason us former comrades in arms are pals for a week a year.

We were riflemen in 'Nam. Grunts. We were in the Second Platoon of Alpha Company. I'm not going to tell you the name of our division. I'm not going to tell you our last names or the lieutenant's name. As the army would put it, that's classified information.

The lieutenant was our pla-

toon leader. He was as bright and shiny and new as that West Point ring he wore. The lieutenant went by the book and was as gung ho as they come.

Let me explain something. The way for an officer in a grunt outfit to make brownie points was through body count. Killing the enemy. It was kind of like a scoreboard. You kept track and the numbers went down to Saigon. The bigger the numbers, the quicker you were helping win the war. You civilians, you probably heard Walter Cronkite giving the numbers on the nightly news.

Body count was a joke. Everybody faked it. Officers cheated to look good and protect their men. You had bad numbers, you got pressure to improve them. Which meant taking some dumb chances.

The lieutenant was too stupid and too gung ho to cheat. We did it the hard way. Our platoon's body count was always tops in the entire battalion. He volunteered us for every dangerous mission there was. Our platoon took twenty percent casualties per month. You don't have to be Einstein to figure it out. In five months you're one hundred percent dead.

Well, we decided to do it during a four day stand-down at division headquarters. You wouldn't think Division was any great deal with its tents

and shacks and dust. But if you had just come in from the field, it was heaven. You could get a hot meal and a cold beer. You could sack out on a real bunk instead of the ground.

To make a long story as short as I can possibly make it, a grenade went off under the lieutenant's bunk. Needless to say, there was some hell raised. Seems that the lieutenant's dad was a Pentagon general. The investigators, the CID boys, knew sure as hell the killers were in the platoon. They couldn't prove diddly. Some of the other guys in the outfit narrowed it down to Marv and me and Jim by process of elimination. They kept their mouths shut. See, they were counting days before rotation, too. They didn't want to hump it back out into the boonies with the lieutenant. They wanted to fly home sitting in the plane's seats. Not in rubber bags.

So this is what it boils down to. Fragging is the term you've heard for what we did. The army called it murder. Murder in the first degree. We wasted one of *ours*, not one of *theirs*. Which is not the basic idea behind fighting a war.

According to lawyer Jim, there's no statute of limitations on murder. We have Leavenworth staring us in the face for the rest of our lives. Or worse, what with everybody dusting

off their electric chairs these days.

Jim pulled the pin, by the way. Marv and me, we kept watch at each end of the tent while he did it. No, I'm not making excuses. I'm just getting the record straight. All three of us, we're equally guilty, equally scared to this very day. Somebody in the trio blows the whistle, next time you see us, we're all going to be in leg irons. The lieutenant's daddy is still around. You believe he's forgiven and forgotten, you believe in the tooth fairy.

Therefore, the get-togethers. Don't kid yourself. The guilt and the fear cook inside you. Year after year after year. So this is what we do each and every August. Inspecting pressure valves. Looking at the needles inside the gauges. Looking to see if anybody's needle is creeping into the red zone. Twelve years so far of doing that. Convincing ourselves that the two others are on an even keel. Able to sleep a little better for the next eleven-plus months.

The last thing in the world we need is a boiler explosion.

**I** was the first to arrive at the marina. I unloaded my gear and checked out the boat.

Being a mechanic, I looked over the motor pretty close. You fish on Lake Seymour by troll-

ing, at low engine speed. If it isn't tuned up properly, all that low-speed running is going to foul your plugs and points. A year ago, we went dead in the water. Took me a half a day to get the damn thing going again. Which is not what I pay rent to do.

It seemed shipshape, so I went into town to shop for my share of the groceries. When I returned, Marv and Jim were unloading their stuff onto the boat. Kind of a coincidence, I thought, them hitting the dock together. It's an eight-hour drive for me, longer for them.

Marv saw me. "Hey, how's the fishing gonna be?" he yelled. "You check with the natives?"

I shook his hand and shrugged. "The manager says spotty. They're not feeding. We'll have to go deep for them."

Marv was built like a fireplug and he wasn't getting any thinner. Except on top. He was combing it from where it grew to where it didn't. His nose and cheeks were redder than ever, more busted capillaries in them. But I've got no room to talk. I take a sip now and then myself.

"The fish haven't a prayer," he said heartily, salesman's grin plastered on his face. "Forget how the other yokels have been doing. Those trout had best be getting their affairs in order."

Jim stepped off the boat. We

shook. "Looking forward to it," he said. "I promised the wife and kids I'd load the freezer with the little beauties."

He looked like a successful lawyer even on vacation. Thin, tanned, hot-combed. You wear grubbies when you're on Seymour for a week. Jim's grubbies, jeans and pullover, looked like they came off the rack at some fancy men's store ten minutes ago. But what the hell. That's Jim.

"One final humongous load ought to do it," Marv told Jim.

So much for small talk. I volunteered to assist, and we walked to the parking lot. We hauled the remaining stuff out of Marv's pickup truck, and I started looking around for Jim's car.

"That's the ball game," Jim said, not exactly looking me in the eye. "I left my car in Yakima at Marv's. I traded the station wagon in this winter for a Porsche. It has many charms, but isn't noted for its luggage space. I phoned Marv a few days ago. He was kind enough to endure my company."

"A toothbrush and a six-pack and you've exceeded capacity," Marv said, winking at me. "A new Porsche. You and me, we're in the wrong business."

I agreed. We laughed politely at Marv's funny. I grabbed an ice chest and we headed for the

dock. Me wondering. Wondering what the hell was going on. We had never carpooled. Never ever.

**I**t was too late to make a serious assault on Lake Seymour's trout. We beached at a campground ten miles uplake. Early August is still tourist season, but we had the place to ourselves. Yeah, there are boats on the lake, houseboats and puddle jumpers, but you've got umpteen campgrounds and a zillion miles of shoreline. You don't have to have neighbors unless you want to.

We set right to work on dinner. Our first-night tradition is New York steaks, sixteen ounces. I brought the barbecue and the charcoal. Marv cranked up his chainsaw, tearing into a fallen log we'd use for a campfire later on. Jim cooked after I got the coals going.

Afterwards, we moved from the picnic table and broke out the lawn chairs. Might as well rough it in style. That's our motto. We positioned them around the fire Marv had crackling and spitting and flaming like a champ. With green wood, it isn't easy.

We'd been drinking beer since we untied from the dock, and we hadn't slowed down much. We opened three more and just

sat there, relaxing, watching the fire, shooting the breeze about nothing.

You wouldn't believe how much beer we guzzle up here. I wouldn't tell you anyway. This I will admit. In '77, we made a rule. No hard liquor, no dope, no firearms. That's the year Marv went sort of cuckoo on straight vodka and started waving around this cannon of a .44 magnum.

He'd made up his mind we were going to cruise slowly and close to the shore so he could blow away a bear. It's so wild at Seymour, it's not unusual to see bear. Me and Jim, we managed to relieve him of the piece and put him to bed. Jim chucked the .44 over the side. Next morning, we had a meeting that lasted two whole minutes. That's when we made the rule, and nobody's mentioned the incident or broken the rule since.

We were chitchatting about football and women, you know, man talk, when I tried to ease the topic into Marv and Jim driving up together. It was bugging me worse and worse. It was something different, a change in the pattern. I had to find out why.

"Kind of a long detour for you, going to Yakima, isn't it?" I asked Jim. "Wish you'd called me. It's a straight shot on I-5 from Portland to Seattle."

We had a moment or two of your basic pregnant silence, then Marv said, "My wife and I split the sheets last fall. I was pretty low. The week before Thanksgiving, Jim happened to be in town and gave me a ring."

"I was there to take a deposition," Jim added quickly.

"Being alone, I was really dreading the holidays. Jim and I went out for a few belts, and I guess I cried on his shoulder. He invited me down to his place for Thanksgiving."

"My pleasure," Jim told me. "We really should get together occasionally throughout the year when schedules permit."

"I owed Jim a biggie," Marv said. "Playing chauffeur today is small payment, don't you think?"

"Yeah, sure. I wasn't criticizing or anything. Just curious."

Jim got up and tossed another log on the fire. "The albatross we wear around our necks grows heavier and heavier when we keep each other at arm's length. We skirt the subject up here and avoid contact for the remaining fifty-one weeks of the year. That's not sensible."

"What are you trying to say?" I asked.

"Mellow out. Relax. Good Lord, if anyone was going to crack, it would have happened ages ago. Lake Seymour is a fine tradition. I look forward to

it. I consider us good friends. Friendship and mutual trust, that's the name of this ball game. If we are indeed friends, let's not be afraid to be."

Jim sat down. Marv said, "My sentiments exactly. No sense stewing and fretting like we do. What's done is done. It's history."

They hoisted their beer cans and looked at me. We clinked them. "Amen," I said, hoping I was convincing.

It was a total crock. Jim liked Marv less than he liked me. He always did look down his nose at us, even before he got to be a bigshot. But I played along.

We drifted back to football and old girlfriends, hooting and hollering and having a grand time. I drank faster than usual. Fuzzing my brain. Had to. Didn't want to be able to think serious right then. Whatever was going on, I was the odd man out.

**T**he fishing procedure is this. One guy at the wheel, nursing the boat along at a snail's pace. The two others on the rear deck. We rig our lines, set our poles into plastic pipes we tape to the railing, crack cold brews, and wait for a strike. Really roughing it.

We drew toothpicks and I got first shift as driver. An hour went by and nobody had a nibble. Marv came up and relieved



me. I tossed in my line, opened a brew (hair of that nasty dog), and tried to figure how I could pry the real story out of Jim. He took care of that for me.

"Marv's going to confess," he said.

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. That evening of drinks in Yakima was sheer luck. He hinted then what his plans were. That's why we had him for Thanksgiving. I've seen him several times thereafter on contrived business trips. I managed to dissuade him on each occasion."

"Why? I don't get it."

"Marv's around the bend. He's going to crack. Not only did his wife leave him, he lost his job. I financed this trip for him."

"He came right out and said he was going to blow the whistle?"

"On yesterday's drive. He plans to do it when he returns home. I don't think I can handle him any longer. The booze has a pretty good grip on him. He's out of control."

I shook my head. "Doesn't make a damn bit of sense."

"Not to us, perhaps. You've heard of delayed stress syndrome, haven't you?"

"Who hasn't."

"Alcohol is Marv's only release for his memories. You, for instance, have the nightmares. Marv has kept the guilt bottled up for fifteen years. Justified as

we felt we were at the time, we nonetheless committed murder, a heavy cross to bear."

"Did I have a dream last night?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"Okay, if Marv does confess, where do we stand?"

"The jurisdiction situation will be complex, but I assure you, they will pursue it."

My stomach was queasy. "We'll be convicted and sent to jail?"

"Not necessarily. If you and I deny it, it will be our word against his, and Marv has not adapted as well as we have to civilian life. He won't be an entirely credible witness if we bring out his drinking and instability."

"So what's the problem? Like you said, it's two against one."

Jim gave me one of his I'm-smarter-than-you-are looks. "Do you wish to endure an investigation and trial? I do not."

"Nope. But your speech last night about us becoming better friends. You and me, we'll both talk it out with him and change his mind."

Jim paused and reached into his tackle box for cigarettes. That tackle box, incidentally, is sacred to him. Odd for a half-baked fisherman, but that's the way he is about all his stuff, especially the box. Marv or me, we need to borrow something, we take it and ask later. Not

with Jim. He'd have a fit.

"It's much much too late. He won't listen."

"Maybe it's for the best," I said. "We'll clear the air once and for all. Besides, with no proof, they'll drop the investigation in nothing flat."

Jim said, "I'm in a Pandora's Box mode. I didn't inform Marv, but I am running in the September primary for a state legislature seat."

"Congratulations."

"Thanks. But you realize what a scandal would mean, don't you? I'd never see my name on the November ballot."

"Can't you stall him till after the election? Maybe by then, he'll have calmed down."

Jim's eyes bored in at me like lasers. "Impossible. Marv is on the edge."

Jim's pole jerked.

"Fish on!" I yelled. That's our signal to the driver. He chops the throttle and hustles out to watch and to help with the net if he's needed. Which Marv did.

"What do you have in mind?" I asked.

Jim was reeling in, glancing over his shoulder at the door. "An accident," he whispered.

**Y**ou wouldn't believe the fishing that day. They damn near jumped into the boat. We couldn't have done anything wrong if

we'd tried. It almost took my mind off my troubles.

In mid-afternoon, one of those storms whipped up and drove us inside. We didn't care. We had enough delicious, pan-sized rainbow trout for tonight's dinner and tomorrow's, too.

The storm ended, and we beached at the next campground. Marv said he'd scout around for firewood. Jim volunteered to clean the fish. Marv broke up laughing and asked Jim if he was sick. See, Jim doesn't much like to get his paws dirty, let alone handle slimy fish guts.

Marv picked up his chainsaw and started up the beach, shaking his head and saying, "I'm leaving before somebody tells me I've been hearing things."

I offered to help Jim with the fish, seeing as there were so many. Which, of course, was Jim's idea behind saying he'd clean them. Him and me alone, to talk. I'd listen, but no way in hell was I going to be party to zapping Marv.

As you might expect, I was doing most of the work. Jim's not awfully handy with a knife or any other tool. When Marv fixed up the saw, Jim told me his plan.

"The next big storm that comes, hopefully tomorrow, will provide our opportunity. I'll arrange to be at the wheel. I'll kill

the engine and say that it quit on its own. Remember last year, how it stalled on us?"

"How can I forget? I had to fix it."

"And you, the expert mechanic, will be called upon for an encore. You will fabricate a reason for requiring Marv's assistance. You and he will be on the deck, your attention on the motor. If there are other boats nearby, the blowing rain will have visibility so poor, you won't be noticed. I will go out the front door, around the outside decking behind Marv, and—"

Jim fluttered a hand.

"He'll have his accident?"

"Yes, an unfortunate accident. Marv slips on the wet deck and goes overboard. We are inside and hear nothing. The storm abates. We realize he is gone, but he has by then drowned."

"How come we're inside and he's outside?"

Jim sighed his talking-to-a-retarded-child sigh. "He was drunk and decided to discover how the fish would bite in a downpour. The alcohol, from what we surmise, contributed to the accident."

"You've got it all doped out, don't you?"

"Preparation is the key. It was true fifteen years ago. It is true today. Are you with me?"

I picked up another fish.

"Are you? For God's sake, I can't guarantee we *won't* be convicted when Marv talks. Are you willing to take that chance?"

"I don't know," I said, my eyes on the fish.

"I did the dirty work fifteen years ago. I will tomorrow. Dammit, are you with me?"

"Okay," I lied. "Okay."

Next day, the sky was crystal clear from the time we got up to well past lunch. Farmers, I guess, pray for that kind of weather. Me too, though I've been out of the praying habit since 'Nam.

Jim had been bitching since breakfast about Marv and me wanting to go fishing that day. He said we had enough trout in the fridge to open a fish market. He wanted to spend the morning on the shore, soaking up the sun and reading, which is what we did. His itinerary for the afternoon was just to cruise uplake and enjoy the scenery. I know why. He didn't want Marv and me alone together until we did our dirty deed.

Marv was hot to throw in a line. I backed him up, saying I was kind of itchy for it, too. Without being too obvious. Jim pouted a while and finally gave in.

I didn't know what I was going to say to Marv. My in-

instincts told me to tell Marv what Jim planned to do. I couldn't quite bring myself to spill the beans, though. See, I don't know Marv any better than I know Jim. I don't know what's going on inside his head, how he'd react to the news. I figured I could block Jim's plans somehow on my own. But if I confided in Marv, he might go bananas if he was as wiggly as Jim said he was. I'd be in the middle of a free-for-all. Thing is, Marv seemed pretty normal. Which had been bothering me since Jim said he was coming off his spool.

Lucky for me, the trout were taking a siesta or something. We had us a nice leisurely chat without any interruptions, touching base on all manner of trivia. Then I asked him how it was going at home.

"Can't complain. I've reconciled myself to the divorce. What's done is done."

"Been down that road myself."

"Professionally, I'm on the upswing. Lot of years went by when I was living from commission to commission."

"Great. Glad to hear it," I said, remembering that Jim told me he was on the financial skids. "Still storm windows?"

Marv laughed. "Oh, hell no! Door to door, having them slammed on you, that's no way to live. I passed my real estate

exam a year ago, shortly after our Seymour pilgrimage. No bull, it's a license to print money. The market's booming. Can I fix you up with some land, a summer cabin? The fishing's nothing to sneeze at there, either."

"Maybe next year."

"How's your life going?"

"Hanging in there," I said.

"Yeah, ain't that the truth.

Cut way down on the sauce, myself. One of these years I ought to have my life in order." He slapped his gut. "Lost ten pounds since May. Lots of calories in the spirits. My new girlfriend doesn't tolerate me coming home lurching off the furniture like I'm a pinball."

"I'm happy for you, Marv."

Come to think of it, I haven't yet seen him really loaded on this trip.

"It's nice to know you're getting your nightmares licked," he said.

I am? "Well, you know what they say about time healing wounds. Haven't woke you up, have I? My apologies if I did."

"No, not me. Night before last, Jim mentioned that you had one. No biggie on the Richter scale, but it woke him. He's a light sleeper anyway."

"Sorry," I said, confused as hell.

"Hey, look," Marv said. "Monsoon time."

He was pointing at the for-

ested hills that ringed the north tip of the lake. Puffy gray clouds were packing in against the terrain. In ten minutes the sky would look like dishwater.

Marv began reeling in his line. "Hot cocoa and a card game. How's that for an agenda?"

"Fine," I said on wobbly legs. "Just fine."

**J**im's script kicked off according to plan. This was the meanest storm yet.

The rain was battering the windows so hard you could barely see the surface of the water. The waves were jostling us like we were on a rowboat in the Bermuda Triangle. Marv and I played pinochle at the dinette while Jim drove.

Surprise of surprises. We went dead in the water.

Jim said a couple of choice cuss words and told us that the motor had been running ragged for the past half hour. He asked me if I'd go out and take a look at it. We were close to a rocky stretch of shore, and he was worried that we'd wash up against it if we were too long without power.

I said I'd be happy to go take a look. I didn't have to ask Marv for a hand. He hopped right up, saying that he knew which end of a screwdriver was which, and that two heads were better than one.

When you swing open the engine cover, it's supposed to stand up by itself. It wouldn't because of the wind, so Marv held it. The rain was blowing damn near horizontal, hitting us like grenade fragments (bad comparison), drenching us. No fun, no fun at all.

I went through the motions, tweaking this, fiddling with that. Boy, I didn't know what the hell to do. My only idea was to keep one eye glued to Marv's rear. I see Jim coming around the corner, I'd jump him before he could conk Marv. We'd have us an ugly little skirmish, but then maybe we'd lay all our cards on the table, including those aces Jim and possibly Marv had stuck up their sleeves.

"How's she look?" Marv asked.

"Could be moisture in the distributor."

"What do they say when you talk to them about your dreams?"

I looked up at Marv. He was as bug-eyed and serious as I'd ever seen him. "Who's this *them*? I don't talk to anybody about my creeper-crawlies except you guys."

"C'mon. No bull. The shrinks you go to. The nightmares about fragging the lieutenant, those dreams are what I mean. The confidentiality between doctor and patient, I've heard that there are exceptions to it. If they involve a serious crime

like murder, the shrinks can notify the law."

Two and two was adding up to four. "Three guesses who put that bug into your ear."

I glanced at our tackle boxes. Jim's was missing, the one he never allowed anybody to touch. I jerked backward a zillionth of a second before Marv slammed the engine cover shut on my head.

I stumbled to my feet, grabbing a wrench. I was in the mood to restyle Marv's nose for him. I didn't; didn't have to. His arms were dangling at his sides. Tears streamed down his face faster than the rain.

"I—"

"Later," I said. "Turn around and stay put."

I tossed him the wrench. "If Jim shows, put out his lights and ask questions later."

I headed up front on the deck behind me, on my hands and knees to keep lower than the windows. Dumb. Crummy strategy. Jim was on the front deck, motioning with a gun for me to get on my feet and come on out.

I obeyed. Seemed like the thing to do. "That wouldn't be Marv's .44 magnum you didn't throw overboard in '77, would it?"

"It would be."

"Which you stored in the bottom of your tackle box?"

"Insurance."

"What was the deal? Was I supposed to zap Marv or was Marv supposed to zap me?"

Jim's designer jeans were soaked. Same with his pullover with the alligator on it. That's all he wore. He was smiling. Wasn't even shivering. "You're a quick read for a grease monkey."

"Didn't matter, did it, Jim? If one of us was out of the picture, it didn't make much difference who. There'd only be two musketeers. If one of us went off the deep end, there'd be no way the other could back him up. One on one. And I guess you know the ins and outs, and have some pull, enough influence to have the survivor locked up in some VA rubber room. You didn't really believe one of us would crack, but you had to make sure before the election. What is it you're trying to be? President someday?"

Jim said, "This solution may be preferable in the long run."

He pulled back the hammer on the revolver.

"Blow us both away, weight us with rocks, and drop us in the drink? Two unfortunate souls swept overboard, maybe one drowning trying to rescue the other?"

Jim lifted the barrel to my head.

"Aren't you worried about

Marv? Where he is now?" I sure as hell was.

"I observed your confrontation. He was near catatonic. I always assumed you would prevail. Marv and I can complete our business at my leisure."

Well, that's what he thought. Storms are noisy. Guess Jim didn't hear the engine start. Marv goosed it. Full throttle. The tub's gutless. It's no racing hydroplane. But the acceleration will knock you a little off-balance when you're on a slippery deck. Long enough for me to charge him.

We went into the front wall. I hit his chest with my shoulder and grabbed with both hands for the gun. Jim was stronger than I'd thought. I had a grip on the magnum, hoping to twist his arm behind him, breaking it if I had to. But he pushed off, carrying us both to the front railing. His free hand was clawing at my neck. I fell on my butt. The gun fired. His momentum took him overboard and the boat ran right over him.

I went inside and cut the throttle. Marv was on the floor, moaning and groaning, in kind of a fetal position, bleeding on the carpet. I removed my belt and made a Mickey Mouse tour-

niquet for him. The round had caught him in the right thigh. The tourniquet pretty well controlled the bleeding, so I thought it must have struck just meat, not bones or major vessels.

I made him as comfortable as I could on the sofa and went to the rear deck. There was a reddish streak on the water fifty meters out. Most likely, when the houseboat ran over him, he somehow got slipped by the propeller. In other words, there was no sense circling, making a search.

I steered for the marina.

Marv said, "What now?"

I said, "The Canadian government is real narrow-minded about tourists bringing guns into their country. They always ask you at the border if you're carrying. We'll have to have a powwow with the Mounties. One of us is missing and there's a bullet hole in the boat."

"Let's make it a long powwow," Marv said.

"That's fine by me," I said, knowing exactly what he meant.

It had stopped raining. The wind had died down to a light breeze. You could see patches of blue here and there. I gave the boat full power and steered for the marina.



MYSTERY CLASSIC

# The Bisara of Pooree

by Rudyard Kipling



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Illustration by Martin Springett

*Little Blind Fish, thou art marvelous wise,  
Little Blind Fish, who put out thy eyes?  
Open thy ears while I whisper my wish—  
Bring me a lover, thou little Blind Fish.*

—THE CHARM OF THE BISARA.

**S**ome natives say that it came from the other side of Kulu, where the eleven inch Temple Sapphire is. Others that it was made at the Devil-Shrine of Ao-Chung in Thibet, was stolen by a Kafir, from him by a Gurkha, from him again by a Lahouli, from him by a *khitmatgar*, and by this latter sold to an Englishman, so all its virtue was lost; because, to work properly, the Bisara of Pooree must be stolen—with bloodshed if possible, but, at any rate, stolen.

These stories of the coming into India are all false. It was made at Pooree ages since—the manner of its making would fill a small book—was stolen by one of the Temple dancing-girls there, for her own purposes, and then passed on from hand to hand, steadily northward, till it reached Hanlé: always bearing the same name—the Bisara of Pooree. In shape it is a tiny square box of silver, studded outside with eight small balas-rubies. Inside the box, which opens with a spring, is a little eyeless fish, carved from some sort of dark, shiny nut and wrapped in a shred of faded gold-cloth. That is the Bisara of Pooree, and it were better for a man to take a king cobra in his hand than to touch the Bisara of Pooree.

All kinds of magic are out of date, and done away with except in India where nothing changes in spite of the shiny, top-scum stuff that people call "civilization." Any man who knows about the Bisara of Pooree will tell you what its powers are—always supposing that it had been honestly stolen. It is the only regularly working, trustworthy love charm in the country, with one exception. [The other charm is in the hands of a trooper of the Nizam's Horse, at a place called Tuprani, due north of Hyderabad.] This can be depended upon for a fact. Someone else may explain it.

If the Bisara be not stolen, but given or bought or found, it turns against its owner in three years, and leads to ruin or death. This is another fact which you may explain when you have time. Meanwhile, you can laugh at it. At present, the Bisara is safe on a hack-pony's neck, inside the blue bead-necklace that keeps off the Evil Eye. If the pony driver ever finds it, and wears it, or gives it to his wife, I am sorry for him.

A very dirty hill-cooly woman, with goitre, owned it at Theog in 1884. It came into Simla from the north before Churton's *khit-matgar* bought it, and sold it, for three times its silver value, to Churton, who collected curiosities. The servant knew no more what he had bought than the master; but a man looking over Churton's collection of curiosities—Churton was an assistant commissioner by the way—saw and held his tongue. He was an Englishman; but knew how to believe. Which shows that he was different from most Englishmen. He knew that it was dangerous to have any share in the little box when working or dormant; for Love unsought is a terrible gift.

Pack—"Grubby" Pack, as we used to call him—was, in every way, a nasty little man who must have crawled into the army by mistake. He was three inches taller than his sword, but not half so strong. And the sword was a fifty-shilling, tailor-made one. Nobody liked him, and, I suppose, it was his wizenedness and worthlessness that made him fall so hopelessly in love with Miss Hollis, who was good and sweet, and five foot seven in her tennis shoes. He was not content with falling in love quietly, but brought all the strength of his miserable little nature into the business. If he had not been so objectionable, one might have pitied him. He vaped, and fretted, and fumed, and trotted up and down, and tried to make himself pleasing in Miss Hollis's big, quiet grey eyes, and failed. It was one of the cases that you sometimes meet, even in our country where we marry by Code, of a really blind attachment all on one side, without the faintest possibility of return. Miss Hollis looked on Pack as some sort of vermin running about the road. He had no prospects beyond captain's pay, and no wits to help that out by one penny. In a large-sized man, love like his would have been touching. In a good man it would have been grand. He being what he was, it was only a nuisance.

You will believe this much. What you will not believe is what follows: Churton, and The Man Who Knew what the Bisara was, were lunching at the Simla Club together: Churton was complaining of life in general. His best mare had rolled out of stable down the cliff and had broken her back; his decisions were being reversed by the upper courts more than an assistant commissioner of eight years' standing has a right to expect; he knew liver and fever, and, for weeks past, had felt out of sorts. Altogether, he was disgusted and disheartened.

Simla Club dining room is built, as all the world knows, in two

sections, with an arch arrangement dividing them. Come in, turn to your left, take the table under the window, and you cannot see anyone who has come in, turned to the right, and taken a table on the right side of the arch. Curiously enough, every word that you say can be heard, not only by the other diner, but by the servants beyond the screen through which they bring dinner. This is worth knowing; an echoing-room is a trap to be forewarned against.

Half in fun, and half hoping to be believed, The Man Who Knew told Churton the story of the Bisara of Pooree at rather greater length than I have told it to you in this place; winding up with a suggestion that Churton might as well throw the little box down the hill and see whether all his troubles would go with it. In ordinary ears, English ears, the tale was only an interesting bit of folklore: Churton laughed, said that he felt better for his tiffin, and went out. Pack had been tiffing by himself to the right of the arch, and had heard everything. He was nearly mad with his absurd infatuation for Miss Hollis, that all Simla had been laughing about.

It is a curious thing that, when a man hates or loves beyond reason, he is ready to go beyond reason to gratify his feelings. Which he would not do for money or power merely. Depend upon it, Solomon would never have built altars to Ashtaroath and all those ladies with queer names, if there had not been trouble of some kind in his *zenana*, and nowhere else. But this is beside the story. The facts of the case are these: Pack called on Churton next day when Churton was out, left his card, and stole the Bisara of Pooree from its place under the clock on the mantelpiece! Stole it like the thief he was by nature. Three days later all Simla was electrified by the news that Miss Hollis had accepted Pack—the shrivelled rat, Pack! Do you desire clearer evidence than this? The Bisara of Pooree had been stolen, and it worked as it had always done when won by foul means.

There are three or four times in a man's life when he is justified in meddling with other people's affairs to play Providence.

The Man Who Knew felt that he was justified; but believing and acting on a belief are quite different things. The insolent satisfaction of Pack as he ambled by the side of Miss Hollis, and Churton's striking release from liver, as soon as the Bisara of Pooree had gone, decided The Man. He explained to Churton, and Churton laughed, because he was not brought up to believe that men on the Government House List steal—at least little things. But the miraculous acceptance by Miss Hollis of that tailor, Pack, decided

him to take steps on suspicion. He vowed that he only wanted to find out where his ruby-studded silver box had vanished to. You cannot accuse a man on the Government House List of stealing. And if you rifle his room, you are a thief yourself. Churton, prompted by The Man Who Knew, decided on burglary. If he found nothing in Pack's room . . . but it is not nice to think of what would have happened in that case.

Pack went to a dance at Benmore—Benmore was Benmore in those days, and not an office—and danced fifteen waltzes out of twenty-two with Miss Hollis. Churton and The Man took all the keys that they could lay hands on and went to Pack's room in the hotel, certain that his servants would be away. Pack was a cheap soul. He had not purchased a decent cashbox to keep his papers in, but one of those native imitations that you buy for ten rupees. It opened to any sort of key, and there at the bottom, under Pack's insurance policy, lay the Bisara of Pooree!

Churton called Pack names, put the Bisara of Pooree in his pocket, and went to the dance with The Man. At least, he came in time for supper, and saw the beginning of the end in Miss Hollis's eyes. She was hysterical after supper and was taken away by her mamma.

At the dance, with the abominable Bisara in his pocket, Churton twisted his foot on one of the steps leading down to the old rink, and had to be sent home in a rickshaw, grumbling. He did not believe in the Bisara of Pooree any the more for this manifestation, but he sought out Pack and called him some ugly names; and "thief" was the mildest of them. Pack took the names with the nervous smile of a little man who wants both soul and body to resent an insult, and went his way. There was no public scandal.

A week later, Pack got his definite dismissal from Miss Hollis. There had been a mistake in the placing of her affections, she said. So he went away to Madras, where he can do no great harm even if he lives to be a colonel.

Churton insisted upon The Man Who Knew taking the Bisara of Pooree as a gift. The Man took it, went down to the Cart-Road at once, found a cart pony with a blue bead-necklace, fastened the Bisara of Pooree inside the necklace with a piece of shoestring and thanked heaven that he was rid of a danger. Remember, in case you ever find it, that you must not destroy the Bisara of Pooree. I have not time to explain why just now, but the power lies in the little wooden fish. Mr. Gubernatis or Max Müller could tell you more about it than I.

You will say that all this story is made up. Very well. If you ever come across a little silver ruby-studded box, seven-eighths of an inch long by three-quarters wide, with a dark brown wooden fish, wrapped in gold cloth, inside it, keep it. Keep it for three years, and then you will discover for yourself whether my story is true or false.

Better still, steal it as Pack did, and you will be sorry that you had not killed yourself in the beginning.

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PRISCILLA GARSTON

CIRCULATION DIRECTOR, SUBSCRIPTIONS

# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon

Illustration by Sheila Smith



There's a delightful conceit in **Sleeping Dog** by Dick Lochte, and I soon discovered that it is merely one of many delights to come. With an admirably straight face, Lochte introduces the novel with a preface. In it he explains that the publisher originally discovered that he had two manuscripts under contract; each was autobiographical, but each told essentially the same true tale. What the publisher decided to do was hire Lochte to rewrite, incorporating bits of both manuscripts into a single book. So the reader gets to know both Leo G. Bloodworth, L.A. private eye, and his precocious young client, Serendipity Dahlquist, very well indeed, for we get to hear them tell the tale in turn. And what a tale it is, too, filled with scenes of soap-opera making, dogfights in smoke-filled back rooms, kidnapping and execution, romance and betrayal. Added to this mix of often offbeat adventures are two of mystery fiction's more memorable characters. *Sleeping Dog* is funny, fresh, and a winner. (Arbor House, \$15.95, 256 pp.)

Fun to read, but not strictly for a sophisticated palate, is Nancy Pickard's **Say No to Death**. The bright and attractive Jennifer Cain of *Generous Death* by the same author also stars in this puzzler. It seems that someone in Jennifer's New England coastal town opposes Liberty Harbor, the renovation project that has promised



prosperity to the townsfolk, a project largely funded by a non-profit group Jennifer heads. Breezy dialogue and an agreeable setting add a lot. (Avon, \$2.95, 192 pp.)

Another seaside sleuth is the narrator of Rick Boyer's **Billingsgate Shoal** (Warner Books, \$3.50, 280 pp.), which won the Edgar Award for Best Mystery Novel the year it was first published. One can readily see why, for Doc Adams, hero and narrator, has a unique and memorable personality and style: He's a Yankee and an original, and it's his voice that adds that special quality to an almost classic tale of an innocent bystander drawn inexorably into the center of a murderous plot. As his curiosity pulls Doc along, the reader is treated to scenes of Cape Cod, Boston and environs, and even a squall aboard a small sailing vessel.

Jeffrey Dean is a retired journalist, now a solitary, independent man of middle years who has turned a hobby of collecting books into a profession of antiquarian bookseller. Dean is also a veteran of several unpaid and occasional CIA missions, carried out during his years as a foreign correspondent. So he is not totally inexperienced—although he *is* innocent—and when he finds himself in the center of an international assassination plot, he's not without resources. In **Hardcover** by Wayne Warga (Arbor House, \$15.95, 233 pp.), Dean proves to be both sensitive and sensible, a nice contrast to the mayhem and secrecy that mark the plot.

There's another 87th Precinct mystery out by Ed McBain, and you should run—don't walk—to the nearest bookstore to get it (Arbor House, \$15.95, 250 pp.). I probably don't even have to explain that **Eight Black Horses**, like its predecessors, reprises the squadroom regulars in another round with their old nemesis, the Deaf Man. What I will mention, though, is the plot premise: the men and women of the 87th Precinct receive anonymous messages, each with photocopied illustrations of police paraphernalia, that appear to correspond to the traditional gifts given during the Twelve Days of Christmas. As usual, the Deaf Man is diabolically clever, and the detectives are sympathetic characters.

**Nightlines** by John Lutz (St. Martin's Press, \$13.95, 196 pp.) features a private eye whose shorter adventures have often been recounted in AHMM. His name is Nudger, and St. Louis is his turf. This case opens when a beautiful but cold young woman hires him to follow up a lead to the killer of her twin sister. The murderer can be found, she believes, via the "nightlines," when secret sharers of the phone company's testing lines hold nighttime conversations. It's all rather bizarre and a bit kinky, and the search for the mur-

derer parallels a growing but disturbing relationship Nudger has with a troubled woman he's "met" using the nightlines himself during the investigation. This one is adult reading with some very suspenseful moments.

Jack Early's first novel (*A Creative Kind of Killer*) was favorably reviewed here, and everywhere else, for that matter. He follows it up with another winner, **Razzamatazz** (Franklin Watts, \$15.95, 331 pp.). An engaging reporter, Colin McGuire, joins the staff of a small-town paper on Long Island, escaping a personal tragedy in his past. He meets a new minister named Annie, and for a brief time it appears that he has left violence behind. Then begins a frightening series of murders . . . and a nightmarish investigation for Colin that threatens his new life and his newfound love. This is adult fare, strong in language and graphic in the suspense built around the actions of a psychopath, but very skillfully written.

If you like a volume of short stories on your bedside table at all times, try **Hitchcock in Prime Time** edited by Francis M. Nevins, Jr., and Martin Harry Greenberg (Avon Books, \$9.95, 356 pp.) The editors have compiled an anthology of the best stories (in their opinion, at least) used as the bases of scripts aired in the ten seasons of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* and *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour*. Even if you're not a buff of those classic TV shows, you'll appreciate the stories penned by master craftsmen, including Ray Bradbury, Stanley Ellin, Cornell Woolrich, John D. MacDonald, Edward Hoch, Ellery Queen, Robert Bloch, and more.

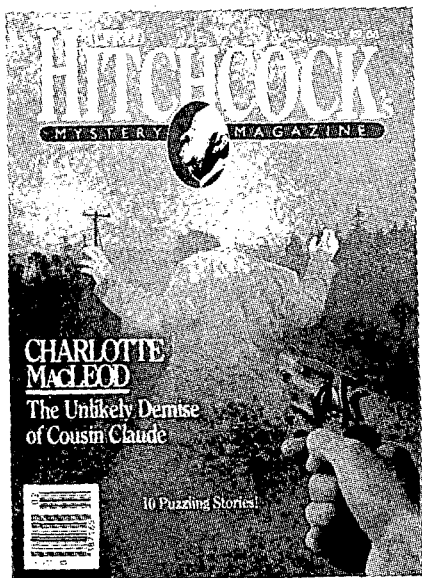
And if you *are* a buff, you'll want to know about **Alfred Hitchcock Presents** by John McCarty and Brian Kelleher (St. Martin's Press, \$19.95 cloth/\$12.95 paperback, 335 pp.), subtitled "An Illustrated Guide to the Ten-Year Television Career of the Master of Suspense." The book is chockful of photos from the shows, synopses and cast lists of all the shows, and—perhaps—more info than you ever wanted to know . . . ? It's a lot of fun for fans, that's for sure.

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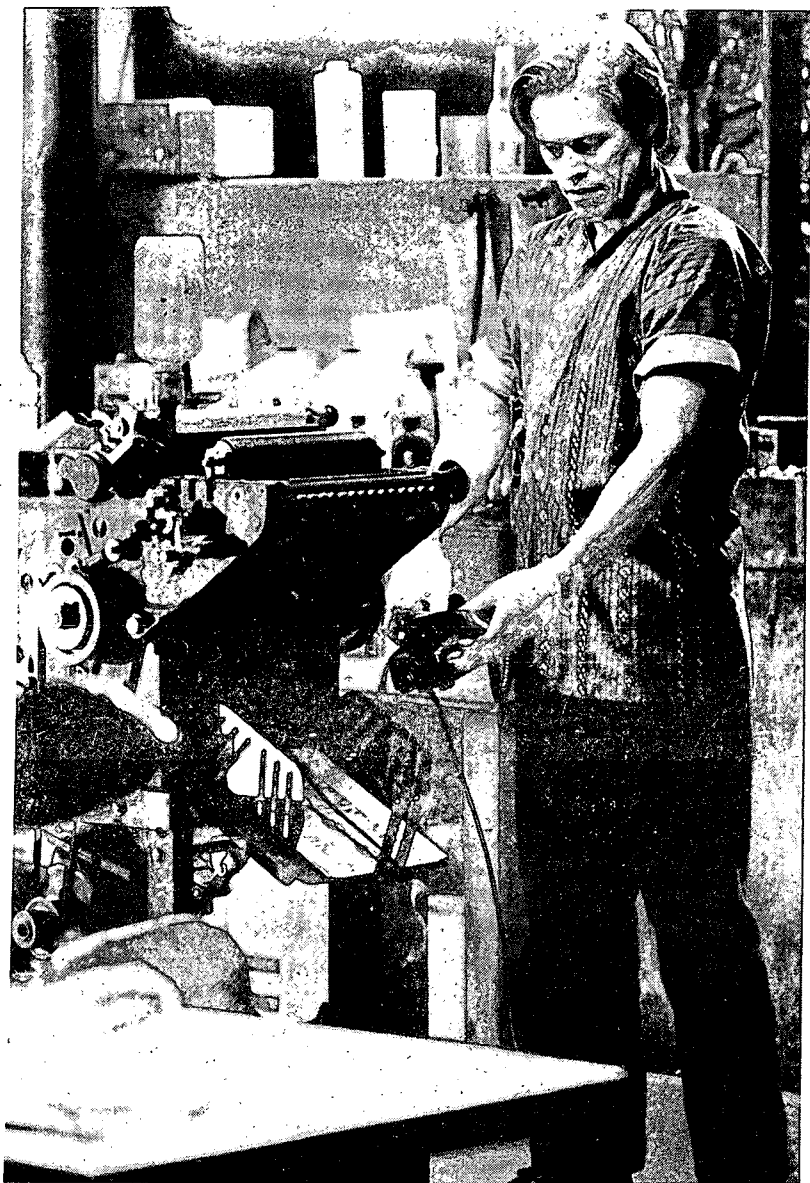
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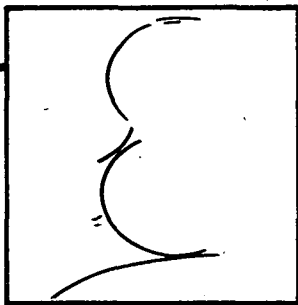


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Willem Dafoe as counterfeiter Eric Masters in his workshop.

# MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



A high-speed, slick crime adventure, *To Live and Die in L. A.* has a solid grounding in both police procedure and the techniques of counterfeit money dealers. Dealer Eric Masters has eluded the law for years. He uses pay phones exclusively, keeps moving his printing presses before anyone can get a fix on his place of business, and has a smart, crooked lawyer who keeps him posted on the latest rules of evidence. The blond, expressionless Masters is a convincing villain: a sybarite who enjoys the sexual perversions available in the L. A. demimonde, he is also a remorseless killer.

Two young government agents, Chance and Vukovich, go after Masters. Chance, emo-

tionally involved in the case and impatient of the rules, has a high arrest record. Vukovich, a rookie whose relatives are all cops, is made uneasy by his partner's increasingly illegal techniques. At first, Chance seems to be justified by the usual red-tape interference from higher-ups, and by the fact that Masters has killed Chance's former partner, an older agent, just before Vukovich came on the job. But the novel of the same title by Gerald Petievich does not resort to the cliché of revenge for a dead buddy.

In the novel, the older agent is there to show that even a resourceful criminal can be brought in by someone who sticks to the book. On the other hand, the movie keeps the au-

dience guessing for a longer time; should we sympathize with the agent Chance or be put off when he breaks the rules?

While this question waits to be answered, filmmaker William Friedkin, who directed *The French Connection*, keeps the action moving in spectacular fashion. There is a pursuit on foot through decaying neighborhoods on the edge of Los Angeles, and another through the airport. The movie's longest sequence is a car chase that speeds past active loading docks and along the freeways. The wrong way driving and mammoth pileups of cars rival the famous *French Connection* car chase under New York's now defunct Third Avenue El. The rest of the action takes us past abandoned warehouse districts, oil tank farms, and other unfamiliar areas of decay in the city.

When the actors move indoors, they behave as if they are rehearsing beer commercials: the words are clear but the accompanying gestures are wooden and unconvincing. Presumably to distract attention

from the mostly inadequate performances, several oddly truncated, unnecessary sex scenes are tossed in. With equal inappropriateness, the movie gets under way with a James Bond-style explosion of action in which agent Chance pursues an Arab terrorist while protecting President Reagan.

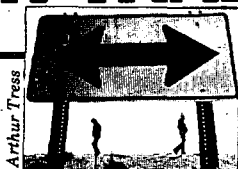
The criminals are more authentic. In a fascinating sequence — luckily without dialogue—Masters goes through the entire process of producing a counterfeit bill. His product is referred to as "funny money" or "paper," and when he mentions "sixty k," he means sixty thousand dollars of it.

Gerald Petievich knows his stuff when it comes to police psychology. His book goes further into the matter than the movie, for which he collaborated on the screenplay. But for an action movie, *To Live and Die in L. A.* offers an unusually nuanced view of agent Chance—and a surprise ending in which the rookie agent Vukovich shows an unsuspected but plausible side of himself.

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# THE STORY THAT WON



The October Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by Shirley Lawrence Steele of Grinnell, Iowa. Honorable mentions go to John L. Reilly of Clearwater, Florida; Catherine Balkin of Brooklyn, New York; Janet E. Streilein of Johnstown, Pennsylvania; Rudolph Minger of Red Bluff, California; La Donna Lane Grigsby of Broken Arrow, Oklahoma; Tom White of Downers Grove, Illinois; Nannette R. Lee of Barnhart, Missouri; Patti Renfro of Longview, Texas; A. M. Broadley of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada; and Don Shaffer of San Mateo, California.

## WHO'S ON FIRST? by Shirley Lawrence Steele

"Quick!" yelled Captain North, jumping into Trooper South's cruiser. "Get us out to the OK turnoff. There's gonna be a shoot-out there at high noon!"

South burned rubber.

Meanwhile, back at the OK turnoff, a mob formed as word spread. Mass confusion reigned. A reporter rat-raced around with camera and notebook. An enterprising kid set up a lemonade stand, hawking his wares at six bits a shot.

Arriving in a cloud of dust, North leaped out shouting: "What precipitated this debacle?" One of the spectators—a Cherokee called Doublearrow—filled him in on the falling-out. The rhubarb started when two drivers—East going west and West going east—met at the OK turnoff and both refused to yield the right of way.

As North closed in from the south and South from the north, East and West drew simultaneously. But West, clearing sable first, had captured East on canvas before East had laid down six brushstrokes.

South, not knowing which way to turn, growled: "The south could'a took the north if you guys hadn't cheated."

"No! No!" hissed North to South, sotto voce. "It's East and West we're after."

A disgruntled spectator spat in the dirt and muttered: "The whole dern bunch oughta calm down or go straight up."

Since the only blood showing came from East's uncapped tube of vermillion, North and South couldn't book East and West, but just so the run wouldn't be a total loss, they hauled in the reporter. He'd shot everyone!



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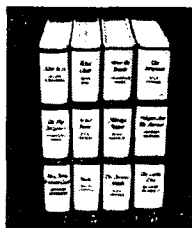
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thanks for maple syrup and  
sleds, thanks for park benches  
and gymnasium floors, thanks  
for fruits and jams and jellies,  
thanks for shade for a Sunday  
afternoon nap, and a special

thanks for the oxygen we  
breathe. Trees give us a lot.  
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Please be careful with fire  
in the forest. A tree will  
thank you.

**Only you  
can prevent  
forest fires.**

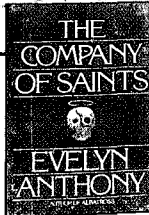
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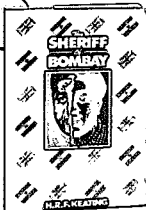
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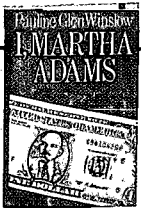
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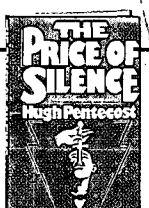
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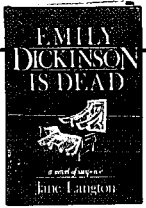
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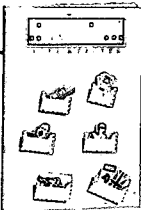
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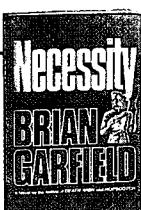
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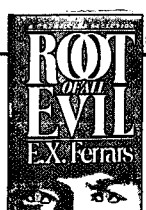
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